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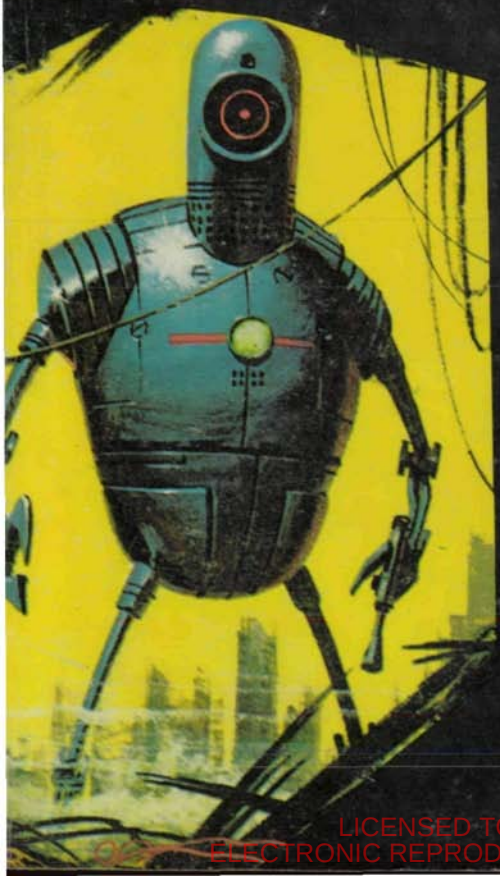

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REPORT ON SOL III

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR SCHOENHERR

We take pride in our culture, our advancement up the evolutionary scale. But possibly "civilization" is only a comparative term.

RABOR flowed into the hall where Yem vibrated.

They twined tentacles until contact was established, and then Rabor began to pulse.

"I am ready with a preliminary report on Sol III," he vibrated.

Yem tingled. "Ah, yes. The major life-forms, I suppose?"

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Rabor oozed embarrassment. "Not exactly. Kwor and Zyla dealt with the *major* life-forms —micro - organisms, vegetable matter, insects."

Yem tingled more strongly. "Then you gathered data on the fourth most important group—the creatures inhabiting the seas?"

Rabor fleched uneasily. "No. I was assigned to mammals."

"The flying things?"

"They are called birds. Mammals are the others—quadrapeds and bipeds. And the bipeds rule Sol III."

Yem writhed in confusion. "That is strange. One would hardly expect a minority to attain power."

"There are many strange things about Sol III," Rabor pulsated. I hardly know where to begin, it is all so incredible. Even our most creative dreamers could not throb such fantasies."

"Allow me to be the judge," Yem pulsed. "I take it the expedition encountered no difficulties?"

"That is correct. The microorganisms paid no heed, and the other life-forms have a limited visual range. We were well above their perceptual abilities, so we could go about our studies without hindrance."

"You infer that the inhabitants might have proven hostile if they could have perceived you?"

Rabor grinched. "Only the bipeds—but their hostility exceeds the wildest imaginings. Not only do they destroy all other life-forms for food, or merely for pleasure, but they also frequently destroy one another."

It was Yem's turn to grinch. "*One another?*"

"Yes. That is their principal occupation."

"Are you quite sure you did not misconstrue their actions?" Yem vibrated.

"Quite sure. We were able to learn one of their two forms of communication — a primitive method called *speech*. A study of the meaning of these sounds, or *words*, confirms our findings. The second method, employing visual symbols known as *writing*, has not been mastered, though we have specimens for further examination. But in words and deeds, we have found the purpose of the bipeds—who call themselves *men*—unmistakable."

"Fantastic!" Yem pulsed.

"I assured you it would be. Men are divided into intricate tribal units, each intent on the destruction of the other. The slightest difference in method of government, form of worship, minor custom, speech, or even pigmentation, is sufficient excuse to visit extermination upon the enemy."

"*Enemy?*" Yem quizzled.

"A speech-form," Rabor throbbed. "Meaning, 'one whom I hate because he has something I want' or, conversely, 'one whom I hate because he wants

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something I have.' In reality, of course, the conflict is over the material possession of the planet and its resources. This conflict, waged between large groups of rivals, is called *war*. When waged by small groups or individuals, it is called *business* or *competition*. But the end is the same—to totally defeat the enemy, and gain more resources.

"What resources?"

"Land. Food. Minerals. Gas. Chemicals."

"What is done with these resources?"

"Why, they are consumed and destroyed as quickly as possible. The very act of *war* destroys a large proportion of them. And the purpose of *business* is to urge and incite men to consume as much as possible. Since almost half of the men are either engaged in *war* or preparations for future *war*, and nearly all the rest are engaged in *business*, you can see how quickly the destruction proceeds."

"Yet you spoke of worship," Yem pulsated. "Do they not recognize the Supreme Being?"

"Let us say that they are *aware* of Him. But their recognition varies. Each group has a different concept, and each believes that its concept is the only correct one; for that reason, those of different beliefs are to be hated."

"But are there no exceptions? Is there not a group which identifies the Supreme Being with peace, or even a group which refuses to recognize a Supreme Being at all?"

"Indeed, there are such groups. But they are the most warlike of all. In fact, the group which identifies the Supreme Being with peace has so many quarrels and disputes amongst its own members as to the exact nature of the Deity that they fight amongst themselves. And when you add to this the hatreds fomented by the differences in speech and customs, and in pigmentation—"

"Please," Yem queebled. "You are making my tentacles ache. Can't you vibrate about something more pleasant? Surely these men are like any other living entities. They take pleasure in reality, do they not? They revere natural beauty—"

"Not greatly. Most of their time, as I revealed to you, is spent in *competition*. They train for it almost from the moment of birth, and give their later lives almost entirely to that end. As a result, they live, mainly, in portions of the planet unsuited to their physical well-being, so that their bodies must be concealed by coverings and much of their time spent in artificially-heated shelters. They seldom venture forth from these dwellings except to proceed from one to another, and if they travel any distance at all, it is in an enclosed vehicle."

"But surely they can *see* their surroundings?"

"They take the utmost pains

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to avoid such awareness. Ever when journeying in their ve hicles, they take care to line the routes of travel with huge structures bearing *words* and injunctions to consume, which block out the view of nature. The dust and dirt and gases shroud their cities in a pall, and artificial illumination blots out all sight of their world as it appears by night. And they further escape consideration of nature through their arts—"

"Ah," Yem tingled. "Their arts."

"I cannot begin to make you comprehend, Rabor throbbed. "Their arts are not like ours."

"You mean they do not glorify the wonder of nature, or of life itself?" Yem wriggled in dismay. "But they have sensory apparatus, and they reproduce. Surely they enjoy the greatest of natural pleasures and make of it their principal source of artistic achievement?"

"Their enjoyment is furtive," Rabor responded writhingly. "There are many intricate laws and customs regulating participation in this pleasure. Usually the reproductive act must be accomplished in total darkness, and almost always in secrecy. Even an open allusion to the act in *speech* or *writing* is forbidden, and artists who depict it are punished by law."

"But is not the activity itself considered a form of artistic expression?"

"No—quite the contrary! The slightest deviation from custom is punishable. And the indulgence itself, hedged about as it is with danger and difficulty, is frequently further hindered by the participants themselves. One of the commonest customs, in regions where the climate permits, is for a mating couple to journey forth in a small, enclosed vehicle to a large arena where huge images are flashed upon a great screen in darkness. And there, amidst an assemblage of hundreds of other couples in their vehicles, they conduct themselves with preconditioned shame and embarrassment."

"Monstrous!" Yem tingled. "No wonder they prefer to spend their time killing one another! But one would think that it would be unsafe to assemble in such a group as the one you speak about. Do they not fear their companions?"

"No. One individual is not allowed to harm another individual for personal reasons. No man is permitted to kill his enemy, however valid the reasons may be for his hatred. And no man is permitted to end the life of a loved one—even if the loved one is doomed to pain and inevitable death. An individual who takes an individual life is a *murderer*, who will be killed in turn by process of law.

"If, however, an individual kills a stranger, during a war, he is a *hero*. The more strangers he kills, the greater a *hero* he becomes. He then rises to a position as leader or even ruler."

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Yem twisted. "That is impossible! I cannot believe in the existence of so unnatural a life-form anywhere in the universe! A being that loathes the very act which created it, a being that hates its own kind, a being that is forbidden to destroy an actual enemy but is encouraged to kill utter strangers because of a difference in appearance or customs or belief. Rabor, I cannot accept this report of yours —it is preposterous!"

Rabor fleched and grinched simultaneously. "I swear that all this is true; all this and much more! If you could only see for yourself—"

"I *will* see," Yem tingled. "You will take me to Sol III yourself, and now!"

"But—"

"No objections! I shall order the ship immediately! Get ready to show me all this."

And so it came to pass that Rabor and Yem voyaged together to Sol III and set down in a region known as the Everglades, from which they quickly vulffed to a certain spot just outside Palm Beach.

"Before we observe the actual beings," Rabor proposed, "I have in mind that you should familiarize yourself with certain of their domestic customs. For this reason, I would like to conduct you to one of their dwelling-places. During this portion of Sol III's cycle, many of the larger ones are deserted, and we can examine one at leisure. I have in mind a certain *mansion*—"

"*Mansion?*"

"A large living-structure. The *word* is a contraction of two others; *man*, an individual being, and *shun*, meaning to avoid. It is a house where a *man* lives when he is important enough in *business* to be able to avoid other men. Only the leaders can live in mansions, but it is there that you will find the most representative display of Sol III culture."

"Very well," Yem throbbed.

They vulffed onward until Rabor located the mansion, which was set amidst the grounds of a private estate. It was indeed deserted, and they flowed into it freely.

Rabor conducted Yem on a hasty tour of inspection.

"*Living room,*" he said.

"They live here? This is the room for reproduction?"

"No. As I explained, that is a private act. In a dwelling it is generally performed in the room set aside for rest—the *bedroom.*"

"But what is all this apparatus, then?"

"*Furniture.* The bipeds spend most of their time doubled up or contorted into odd positions called *sitting* or *lying down.*"

"This is called living?"

"Indeed. Bipeds devote most of their waking hours to labor at *business* or *war*, just so that they can enjoy a few hours to themselves, during which they *sit* or *recline*, as they please. And, of course, one-third of their lives

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is spent in complete rest, or *sleep*. This time is passed in the *bedroom*. Here it is."

"But such a small and gloomy place," Yem tingled. "I would not wish to pass a third of my existence here! Even if it was all devoted to pleasure."

"*Bathroom*," Rabor pulsed, as they flowed on. Briefly he explained the process of elimination and the functions of cleansing and adorning the body.

"Very vital," Yem throbbed. "But why then is this not the *biggest* room? Surely what happens here is most important of all? And is it not a source of pride to men that they can eliminate waste-products and clean themselves regularly? I should think they would want their fellow-men to observe these efforts towards betterment. A larger room—" He paused. "Like this one—"

Rabor vibrated. "No. This is the *dining-room*, where men eat. They gather together here in happy social groups to consume the flesh of animals and devour vegetables and fruits."

Yem quatched sneffly. "You mean they are actually *happy* to eat what they have killed? And they are not ashamed to perform the function publicly?"

"All their greatest festivals involve eating."

"But that is horrible! To conceal the functions which make one a better, cleaner, healthier being—and to openly display one's cruelty, greed and capacity for absorbing the substance of other living things! Ridiculous!"

Rabor quickly flowed into the study. "You wished to learn for yourself about their art and culture," he pulsated. "Here you will find evidences of what I informed you about."

His tentacles waved. "*Books*," he vibrated. "Containing the *words* of communication. "And on the walls, *pictures*. Men excel in the graphic arts."

Yem quiggled the pictures. "Horrible!" he flecked. "What is the meaning of these monstrosities?"

"This is, as I previously explained, art. In fact, it is the very highest form of art. Only a few great leaders are able to own such examples, which were created by a man called Picasso."

"But these things are hideous —who can bear the sight of them? Even on Saturn you won't find such horrors. Do *men* really look like *this?*"

"Of course not. It is not considered artistic to portray men as they are, nor anything in nature. Misrepresentation is the greatest and most important characteristic of creative activity. *Words* placed together without meaning are called *poems*. Lumps of inanimate substance kneaded into grotesque, misshapen forms are called *sculpture*. Then there are sounds, called *music*. But allow me to demonstrate—"

Rabor's tentacle twiddled with

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the dial of a television set. The screen flickered into life.

"Do not be alarmed," he throbbed. "These are only images, transmitted for enjoyment. Actually, they are meant only to consume time between *business* announcements. If you will only watch for a while, I am sure they will have music."

Yem watched.

He watched for almost two hours, during which he learned more about man than Rabor could ever have explained.

He saw a pile advertisement and watched animated animals singing and dancing around rolls of toilet-paper. He saw three different automobiles, each the lowest-priced of the Low Three. He witnessed divers, lumberjacks, riflemen and athletes demonstrating their virility by puffing on various brands of cigarettes. He saw the thrilling race between two pills descending into cross-sections of the human stomach.

And in between were actual *human beings*, as they called themselves, entertaining the viewers by shooting one another, going insane, plotting robberies and holdups and kidnappings, punching one another with their fists, or attempting to steal each other's mates. And every so often there were episodes involving various groups of bipeds called *families*, who seemed to live in still another world. In *this* world, there were no scenes of violence; everything was quite friendly and amusing, and most of the events involved methods whereby the female and the small offspring outwitted or triumphed over the male.

Yem twined with Rabor. "You deceived me," he tingled. "There are two worlds, are there not?"

"No. This is entertainment—make-believe. Fantasies. Men are not allowed to kill one another as individuals, so they enjoy seeing the pretense. Families are not so happily grouped, but it is flattering for them to identify themselves with the images on the screen. And remember, the real underlying purpose of all this is to incite the viewer to consume more natural resources. But wait—you wished to learn about *music*. And that, I believe, is about to be presented now. Ah, yes!"

The figure flickered forth, gyrating with a guitar. And then the sound came.

"Yem!" Rabor grinched. "What is wrong?"

Yem writhed in agony. "No!" he squoggled. "No—stop—"

A twiddle of tentacles and the set went off.

"Thank you," Yem flecked, weakly. "I do not believe I could have endured another moment. So that is *music*." He pulsed wearily. "Now I can believe you. Men are irrational beings indeed. They detest their very natures, they abhor one another, they distort everything in their lives. Is there nothing they hold sacred?"

"One thing only," Rabor vi-

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brated. "The symbol of power. I will show you. Usually this symbol is carefully concealed, but I know where it is hidden."

He flowed over to the wall, parting a drape with a tentacle and grasping the knob of a safe until attuned with the combination. The safe swung open and Rabor scooped out the contents.

"Here," he throbbed. "This is what men want."

"But these are only little pieces of green parchment."

"They are covered with words and pictures. Are they not interesting?"

"Interesting, perhaps. But of no value."

"No value at all," Rabor pulsed. "Come, shall we go back?"

And they vulffed off into the night. **THE END**

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A misshapen Martian farmer could buy a beautiful Terran wife and even if she reviled him, he owned her body. Marko knew this and should have been satisfied with his bargain. But Marko had pride — Marko had heart. He could not compromise with his—

BLONDE CARGO

By ADAM CHASE

AN UNCOMFORTABLE silence as palpable as a wall sprang up between them after they had climbed into the sand sled together.

Marko sat huddled over the controls in front, a spindle-limbed figure of typical Martian build, with the slightly over-large Martian head, the pipe-stem Martian arms and legs, the enormously developed Martian chest to breathe the thin cold air of his native planet. He didn't want to look back at the Earth girl. Almost, he was afraid to. For Marko was a shy man, a 'ponics farmer who made the journey to Syrtis Station only

The dream-horrors

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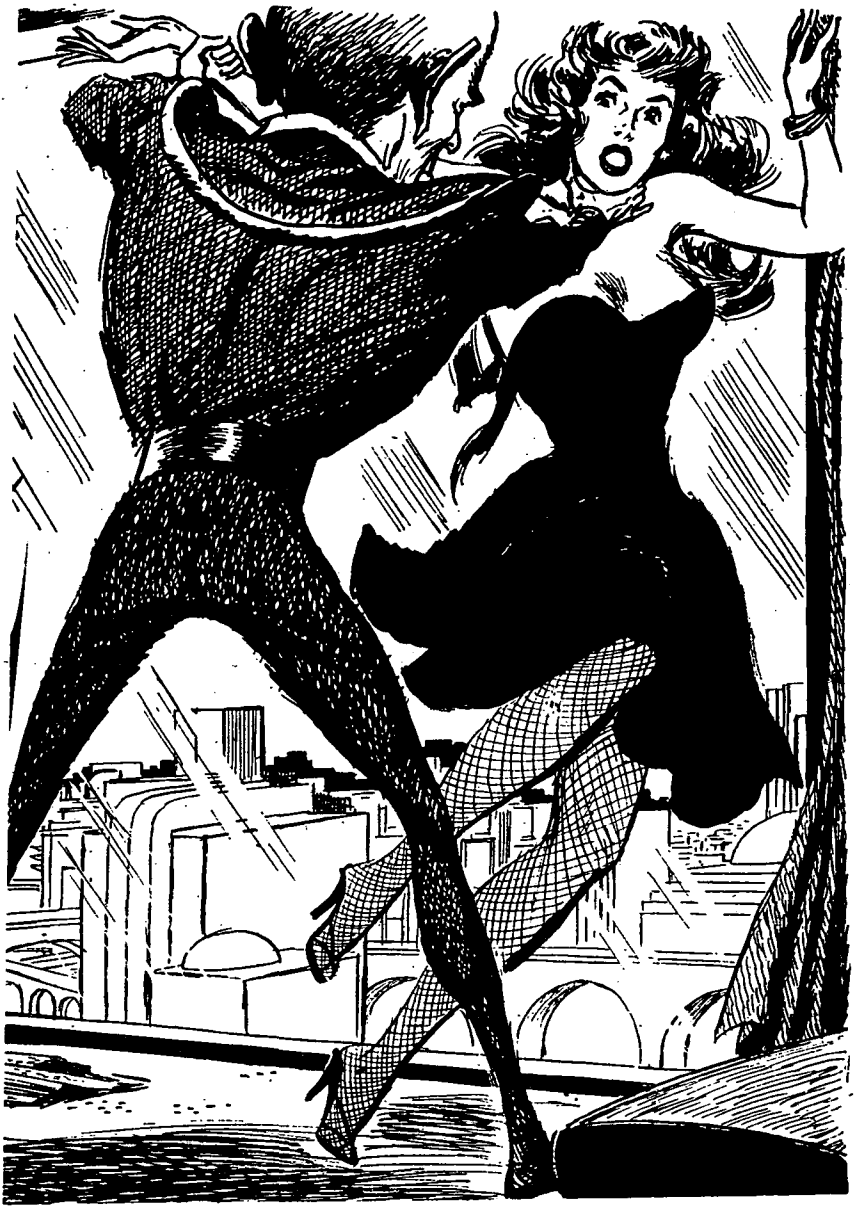

were bad enough, but this was reality!

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four times during the long Martian year to sell his crops for transhipment to over-populated, underfed Earth.

The girl frightened him. He had explained her silence at the spaceport by the one emotion he knew so well because it was his own: shyness. But he had to admit she did not look shy. And, also, she was almost incredibly beautiful—a tall, lithe yellow-haired girl. Marko had never dreamed, when he signed up for her, that she would be so beautiful. Still, her silence could not be explained by shyness; he knew that now, he admitted it to himself.

Once he looked back over his scrawny shoulder at her, and what he saw made him shudder. She was staring at the back of his head with an intense look of uncompromising, haughty hatred. Her face was a mask of hate and Marko was at once thankful that the obsolete sand sled had been built in tandem. This way, he wouldn't have her hatred there beside him, where he could see it, for the long trip across the desert to his 'ponics farm.

With a whine, the old engine started. There was a puff of sand and the thrusting force of acceleration, then they were speeding across the ochre sands away from Syrtis Station.

"You're going to like the farm," Marko said, proud of his English. "I know you're going to like it."

The girl did not answer him. The girl? But she had a name, now that she had arrived on Mars in the liner and he had signed all the papers. Her name was Janet. Janet Marko now, because Marko had just that one name. The Earth girl who looked at him with such hatred, for whom he had paid out a year's profits from the small 'ponics farm, was his wife and he was taking her home.

She still had not spoken when they reached the farm. Marko stopped the sled and waited while she bundled up, then threw the cockpit canopy back, climbed out and offered his thin arm to help her alight. She didn't take it, but swung down lithely from the sled without aid. Then she followed him on the run past the 'ponics tubes and tanks and through the cold and biting wind to the small pre-fab house which was Marko's home and which now, he thought with sudden tenderness, would be hers.

When Marko shut the door, Janet removed her heavy,

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cheap overcoat. She was panting, and her face was red.

"It's the thin air," Marko explained shyly. "It takes a few weeks for an Earthman to get used to it. You'll be all right."

Politely, he took her coat. As he did so, his bony hand touched her shoulder. Janet Marko, the Earthgirl, his wife, recoiled as if he had struck her. And, for the first time, she spoke.

"Don't touch me," she said coldly. It was a beautiful voice she had, but the words were wrong, all wrong. "You bought me, and I'm your property, I guess, unless you want to let me go of your own free will. Those are the laws, Marko. But don't expect me to let you touch me."

"But I—you're my wife!" Marko cried in a shocked voice.

She shrugged haughtily. "Anything you get from me, you'll have to take by force. Anything, Marko. If you try to touch me, I'll fight you. You're a Martian, and you're scrawny. I'm probably as strong as you are. I may be stronger. Are you going to make me find out?"

She did not speak in heat. She was quite calm, icily calm and hating.

"No, I—"

"And if you should be the stronger," she went on implacably, "then you'd better learn not to turn your back. If you try to take anything by strength, and if you turn your back, I'll kill you. I'll take a knife to you. I'll do anything I have to."

"Then why did you come here?" Marko asked, still shocked, the disappointment welling up in him like sudden grief. "Why did you come to Mars?"

"Why?" Janet laughed. It was not a pretty sound. "Because there are too many mouths to feed on Earth. Because it was the only way to get to the outworlds—for a girl with no money."

There was more, of course, but she didn't finish it. If Marko voluntarily let her go, she was free, and on Mars, and would keep her portion of the bride price. It was the law.

"All I wanted was for you to be happy, to like it here," Marko said in despair. "I worked so hard to fix the house up for you. I'm a lonely man. I—come, look at the kitchen! It is a kitchen for a woman, you'll see. Come!"

In his enthusiasm, he touched her shoulder again. Her face didn't change, but

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she swung on him without warning, balling her fist and hitting him hard in the face. Blood spurted from Marko's nose and he staggered back. Involuntary tears sprang to his eyes, and he averted his face, staring numbly at the wall, aware of the salty taste of blood in his mouth and the shattered dreams which had come collapsing down all about him.

"Well?" Janet demanded. "Have you had enough?"

"I wouldn't touch you in anger," Marko protested. "I'd never try to hurt you. Never, don't you understand? I didn't send for you to do that." He cried brokenly, "It was a wife I wanted, a wife I sent for. My wife . . ."

For a brief instant, surprise fought the cold hatred in Janet's voice. "Then you won't . . . I mean, you won't try and . . ."

It was as if her sudden surprise was a wedge in the wall which Marko could breech. He stepped around her to the door, careful not to touch her, and opened it. The wind howled.

"You are no wife!" he cried. "You didn't come here to be a wife! You cheated me. Get out! Get out of my house. I don't want you here. I don't want you in my house."

Janet just stood there.

"Go on, I don't want you here. Take the sand sled. It's yours. I give it to you." He sobbed brokenly, "With my best wishes. Now go . . ."

Janet went through the doorway and out into the wind. Marko took her worn overcoat off the wall peg and threw it after her. It caught in the wind and billowed, then fell to the sand. Marko ran outside, picked it up and dropped it like a cloak over her shoulders. When his hands touched her this time, she didn't say anything.

Marko was all choked up. He couldn't speak. He pointed to the sand sled and, the cloak flying out behind her, she ran to it. She clamped the glassite canopy down with a bang, there was a puff and a spurt of sand, and the sled whined away.

Marko went back into the house. He walked into the kitchen, his thin shoulders slumped, just as if he was taking Janet through it, showing it to her.

"This is the range," he said aloud. "Electric. We have our own generator. Over here, my wife, is the food freezer. I'll bet," he added with a sad smile, "there isn't another 'ponics farm in the whole of

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Syrtis with a food freezer this size. And here, here is the . . ."

He went on, giving the tour to a woman who was no longer there, a woman who had only existed, as he had envisioned her, in his dreams.

Afterwards, he returned to the small living room and sat down, his elbows on his knees, his head hanging.

She was no wife, Marko thought. She had never meant to be a wife. It was a trick, a trick she had played on him to earn her passage to Mars. Well, she had earned it, and he was alone again.

He buckled on his heavy cold-weather outer garment and made his way outside to the vats. He spent two hours among them, doing mostly unnecessary things, for he had worked hard the past week so that he could give all his attention, at least for the first few days, to his wife.

But he couldn't concentrate on his work now. All he saw was her face. In the vats, in the sand, in the pale blue sky. Her face—not as he had seen it, but as he imagined it could be. The same beautiful face, so unexpectedly beautiful, but smiling now, smiling as he imagined she could smile, a small, secret, loving smile, especially for him.

Where would she go? he thought. There were the auctions, of course. Since she had left him and he willingly had let her go, she was now free to put herself up for auction with one of the big companies in Syrtis Station. She would have to do that, he realized, since there was no employment for her, an outworlder, anywhere on Mars. But he knew about the auctions, and she didn't. He shuddered. She could be bought not as a wife but as a slave. She could be purchased outright, as chattel. And there were tales in circulation of what happened to such girls in the dives on the narrow streets surrounding the spaceport in Syrtis Station.

I should hate her, he thought. How can I do anything but hate her? But he knew at once he did not hate her, knew, in fact, that his own unexpected gentleness had probably made it possible for her to carry out the plan which she had formulated, perhaps only tentatively, on the long journey from Earth. Reasoning thus circuitously, he convinced himself in a comparatively short time that he was to blame.

And he knew she might get into trouble. Into desperate trouble. After what had hap-

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pened, there could be no thought of bringing her back as his wife, but—possibly—she might need help.

Marko went to the machine shed, opened the double doors against the howling wind, and climbed aboard the ancient tractor he used for surface farming near the well during the brief summer season of the Martian Syrtis. It would take him hours to reach Syrtis Station on the tractor, he thought, long hours in which anything might happen. Anything.

With a lurch and a clatter, the tractor started.

The sign surprised her. It was hung on the brick wall next to her shoulder, and it said:

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SLAVES
SWEETHEARTS
Martian Imports, Ltd.

The rest of the fifty girls had come straight to Mars for the auction. Janet had met them on the spaceship from Earth, but hadn't become friendly with them. They were hard girls, with knowing, experienced eyes, and one of them had once told Janet, not elaborating, that she was too incredibly naive to be true.

Janet had arrived at the very end of the auction, after the other girls had been sold one at a time to the highest bidders. Most of the crowd in the auction market had already drifted off, only a few stragglers remaining. But when Janet explained her situation to the auctioneer, an Earthman with dark eyes and the lines of dissipation etched deeply into his face, he had appraised her with an expert, professional eye, nodded earnestly, and banged his gavel.

What happened after that shocked Janet. She hadn't expected it because she hadn't thought of it, never having allowed her thoughts, on the long journey from Earth, to go beyond the unknown purchasing husband she was determined to cheat. Now the crowd drifted back slowly, and voices were raised as Janet, alone in front of the brick wall, was seen.

The dissipated-looking auctioneer sang her praises elaborately, with dry professional enthusiasm. ". . . and that skin," he concluded, "you have only to see . . ."

His big hand tore abruptly at Janet's dress, pulling it

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down from her shoulder. She shuddered and drew back—hard against the brick wall.

They shouted like animals then—Earthmen and Martians alike. They clamored for her, and the bidding was high, the competition fierce. All the auctioneer had to do was sit back and wait.

"Four hundred credits!"

"Five hundred!"

"Five-fifty!" piped an ancient Martian with the ugliest face Janet had ever seen.

"Six hundred!"

"Seven hundred!" shouted a big, burly Earthman, whose eyes told exactly what he wanted to do with Janet.

"One thousand credits," a new voice said.

There was a sudden silence as every face turned toward the newcomer. It was a woman, a half-breed probably, with the leathery Martian skin but the build of an Earthwoman of middle age. She had the flattest, most chillingly cold eyes Janet had ever seen.

"Old Hannah wants her," an Earthman complained.

"What old Hannah wants . . ." a Martian said, letting his voice trail off because it was unnecessary to go on.

Disgruntled, the bidders began to drift away a second time. Old Hannah waited, wearing a leather windbreaker, her hands on her hips, her legs widespread and balanced. The auctioneer banged his gavel the customary three times. Old Hannah's price had been beyond the reach of all the others. She had meant it to be.

Five minutes later, dazed, not even knowing what she had been purchased for, Janet left the auction hall with her owner.

The dissipated-looking Earthman auctioneer, whose name was Hogan, stood for several moments alone in front of the brick wall where he had knocked down so much human chattel to the highest bidder. Then, lighting a scented cigarette, he took down the auction notice. It would be several weeks, he knew, until the next auction. He sighed. He couldn't help thinking of the strikingly beautiful but naive-looking Earthgirl who had been the last of the lot. What was her name? Janet. She had cancelled a marriage contract with a Martian farmer, as so many of them did, so often. Hogan clucked his tongue. He wondered if Janet knew what she was letting herself in for. Old Hannah, he thought, shaking his

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head. No, the girl called Janet couldn't have known. It was unthinkable that, knowing, she would have gone off with Old Hannah. Though the law, of course, clearly said she had no choice.

Hogan sighed once more and went home.

The Martian's name was Onc. He was big for a Martian but small by Earth standards. He was the hall porter in one of the shabby tenement buildings which had been constructed in Syrtis Station during the first enthusiastic expansion of the ancient city as the center of Mars' spacefaring activities. Now the building was run down and for Onc, who in his youth had wanted to manage a big interplanetary hotel like the Lowell on Phobus, it was a port of no return.

Onc didn't know what to make of the nervous little Martian who stood before him in the dim hallway, shuffling his feet uneasily, twisting his hat in anxious bony hands, glancing about apprehensively as if he expected the very floor to open up and swallow him.

"Yes?" Onc asked gruffly, as was his way, for the second time. "What do you want?"

"My name is Marko," the other stammered uneasily. "I was told the auctioneer Hogan lives here."

"So?"

"I was wondering—could I see him?"

"He expecting you?"

"No, sir. But I thought—"

"What's it in reference to?"

Marko didn't answer right away. Then he said: "It is urgent—and personal."

Onc shrugged. If the Earthman Hogan had been a tenant who tipped him on Martian Freedom Day, he might have refused Marko entrance to the apartment. But Hogan was a hard-drinking, quiet, bitter man who didn't believe in gratuities, so, with another shrug, Onc told Marko the apartment number and stepped aside to let him pass toward his goal.

I never saw anyone who looked so nervous, Onc thought, then settled down with a lurid thriller about the post World War III days on Earth and in a little while forgot all about Marko.

It was Hogan's fourth potent drink, a Martian cacti brew which corroded most Earth stomachs after a few months. But Hogan had learned, almost, to live on it. With *anaq*, you could almost forget about food. And you could

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certainly forget a squalid existence . . .

There was a knock at the door.

"It ain't locked," Hogan called.

The door opened slowly and a little Martian came in, his movements timid, his face almost ashen in color.

"Yeah?" Hogan said.

"I—this afternoon you—auctioned off an Earth girl with yellow hair and beautiful green eyes. Her name was Janet."

"What if I did?" Hogan asked belligerently.

Marko took a deep breath. "Who bought her?"

"Why should I tell you?" Hogan demanded in a belligerent voice.

"I just—what harm would it do if you told me?"

"I'm not supposed to give out that information."

Marko's eyes seemed suddenly to grow glassy. Hogan realized with surprise that they had filled with tears. "She is my wife," Marko admitted unhappily.

"Your wife? Oh, I get it. You're the sap she suckered into paying her way out here."

"She is my wife," Marko insisted.

"Well, I ain't telling. It's against the law."

Marko, said desperately: "I have money."

Hogan's eyes brightened. He took another drink from the *anaq* bottle without offering any to Marko. "Yeah? How much?"

"Five credits," Marko said hopefully, taking a grubby five-credit note from the pocket of his trousers. "It's all I have."

"Five?" shouted Hogan. Then he began to laugh. "Come on, you cheap grifter, scram out of here. Five credits! Beat it, you're breaking me up."

Shoulders slumped, Marko said, "But I have nowhere else to turn. My wife—"

"Get out, I said."

Marko shuffled from the room, closing the door quietly, politely. He went slowly, heart-brokenly down the stairs into the cold dark night of Syrtis Station. He felt dejected and utterly helpless.

The sign over the door said:

ESOTERIC DREAMS FOR SALE, *fifty credits per hour, Hannah Hopp, prop.*

"In there?" Janet asked uncertainly.

"In there," Old Hannah cackled. "Come on, it's late.

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No reason I can't get a night's work out of you."

"What—what do I have to do?" Now that she had gone through with it, Janet felt scared. Her mouth was dry, her throat felt constricted, and her palms were damp. She thought of Marko and his farm and found herself wondering suddenly what the shy little man who had tried so hard to be her husband, to make her his wife, was doing right now.

They went inside and down a long mirror-lined corridor. The mirrors made Janet nervous.

"Reflection," Old Hannah cackled, "is conducive to the dream state. You dream, child. That's all."

"Dream?"

They went down the reflecting corridor to a large room which was completely bare except for two beds, lounges really, and a large screen on the far wall. The screen was blank and all silvery looking. It was an eyecatcher.

"Dream," Old Hannah said. "But you take certain drugs to make the dreams vivid. You won't be asleep, really, and although the dreams originate in your mind they're not *of* your mind. That is, they're drug-induced. Such dreams," she cackled, "as would curl your lovely blonde hair."

"But—dream? Why?"

"Because a man will come in here to share your dreams, to take the drug along with you and merge his dream with yours and project it on the screen you see. It's quite painless. Quite safe." Old Hannah paused, then showed broken yellow teeth. "But oh so enjoyable for the customer."

Janet didn't understand about the dreams. But ever since she'd mounted the auction block, her cold haughty strength had deserted her. She felt like a bewildered little girl in a world of giants. And Old Hannah's leer almost made her sick.

"I don't think I want to," she said.

Crack! Old Hannah's hard hand left an imprint on Janet's cheek. Janet came within an inch of striking back. She was bigger and obviously stronger than the crone. But she remembered how she had struck Marko for no reason at all, and she stood there with her head bowed.

"You'll do it," Old Hannah said. "You'll do whatever I say. I bought you. You belong to me. Do you understand that?"

Janet heard a strange,

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strained voice say, "Yes. Yes, ma'am."

Old Hannah chuckled, and departed.

Janet sat down on one of the lounges to wait. Nothing happened for half an hour. Dreams, she thought. What kind of dreams? Shared dreams, the crone had said. But what did shared dreams mean?

Just then the door opened, and Old Hannah came in leading a fat, perspiring Earthman. The crone had two plastic cups in her hand. The Earthman, who seemed to know the procedure, stretched out on one of the side-by-side lounges. He did not look at Janet. He looked straight ahead, an eager expression on his face, at the blank screen.

"Drink," Hannah commanded, giving one of the cups to Janet. The other one she gave to the big Earthman, who quaffed it in one eager gulp. Janet sipped hers and found it vaguely smoky in taste, but not unpleasant.

Old Hannah went to the door, walking softly. She opened it and called: "Pleasant dreams! Ah, pleasant dreams . . ."

The door closed. Janet's head began to whirl, and strange images flashed before her mind's eye. The Earthman sighed.

The bright silver screen began to writhe. The writhing solidified, took shape.

Janet screamed.

As he turned the corner, head tucked into his collar against the howling wind, Marko heard the footsteps. He stopped, wondering if he were being followed.

"Hey! Hey, you!" a voice hailed him.

Marko turned. It was the auctioneer, Hogan.

"Don't talk," Hogan said. "Just listen. And if you tell anybody about this, I'll wring your scrawny Martian neck. You get me?"

"About what?" Marko asked, not really caring.

"All right. All right, I'm a softie. About that girl, about that wife of yours. It was Old Hannah took her. Hannah Hopp."

Marko felt a shiver which had nothing to do with the cold, windswept night. He turned to thank Hogan, but the auctioneer was already retreating, leaving a reek of *anaq* which the wind dispersed almost at once.

Old Hannah, Marko thought numbly. Dreams for sale. Janet. Oh the Great Polar Gods, Janet!

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He ran ahead desperately.

"Like it?" Old Hannah asked the big Earthman.

He nodded.

"Those new girls," Hannah said. "They're always best. They add an element of intriguing fear, don't you think? You'll come back tomorrow?"

"As long as I have a credit to my name," the Earthman vowed, and meant it.

"How's the girl?"

"Not so good. In fact," he added, "she looked kind of sick when I left her."

"It always happens at the beginning. They think the dreams are their own. They don't realize the drug is almost entirely responsible. But of course, after a few months, the dream world and the real world merge, and the drug is no longer necessary. Well, good night."

"I'll be back," vowed the Earthman.

Janet's second customer came in fifteen minutes later. He was a teen-aged Martian of a wealthy family.

"Got a new one?" he asked Old Hannah.

"Off the spaceship today."

The young Martian grinned. "That's for me."

And Old Hannah led the way.

The teen-aged boy, because he was a Martian, turned out to be much worse. Forced to spend most of their time indoors during the long Martian winter—almost as long as an Earth year, it was—the Martians knew all about dreaming. With them it was a highly developed art. The dreams served, instead of mastered, the adept. Martians were connoisseurs in this field.

The boy was very adept indeed.

Reclining in the drowsy torpor induced by the drug, Janet watched the vivid, three-dimensional images march one after another across the screen. She heard noises of contentment from the Martian boy's throat.

It wasn't that the dreams were obscene. Mere obscenity, understandably induced by the drug, she could have withstood. But the dreams bordered on the abstract, merging now with her consciousness and a moment later seeming to pluck her consciousness from her, dragging it to the screen on which the images flickered, and crept, and tumbled, and lay supine—as if, somehow, all the hidden ugly thoughts of her race and her sex could somehow be gleaned from her brain and presented on a shining silver screen for

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the Martian to enjoy. She felt weak, exhausted, and utterly defeated. She couldn't do anything now. But later, when the drug wore off, when she had strength enough to stand, she would see that she did not dream again.

She thought of Marko. He seemed—now, in retrospect—ineffably gentle. It was as though she had been seeking something all her life, through the years of near-starvation on Earth, the long weeks of the spaceflight, the brief hours on Mars—and as if that something had suddenly become personified in the form of the shy 'ponics farmer of the Syrtis. She cried out his name. The dream-pattern on the screen writhed and changed. The Martian boy sighed.

No, she would not let herself dream again, not these dreams, not here in the terrible room with the screen. No matter what.

No matter what she had to do.

The third one was a Martian, twice the boy's age, with the scrawny build of his people. He reminded her of Marko—until she saw his face.

"Dream," Old Hannah said, and left them.

Janet fought the lethargy which bound her to the lounge. After the door had closed, but before the images began their mad whirl on the screen, she dragged herself to her feet and plunged at the screen, trying to drag it down.

"What are you doing, you little fool?" the Martian demanded.

They struggled together. ". . . I paid for this . . . these dreams . . ." panted the Martian.

The screen fell.

Behind it was a window, and a long drop through the dark of the night to an unseen alley below.

They struggled together, at the window.

"I don't know anyone named Janet," Old Hannah told Marko.

"But he said—"

"*Who* said?" Hannah demanded craftily.

Marko could not reveal the man's name. "I know she's here," he repeated stubbornly.

"If you don't get out, I'll have you thrown out," Hannah warned him.

He said suddenly, realizing even as he spoke that he could not be convincing, that his threadbare clothing and his naive, tired face put the lie to his words, "Very well, I want

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a dream. I want a new girl. Brand new. I will pay."

He knew now that he should have come in with that story. Then maybe . . . maybe . . .

All Old Hannah did was laugh.

Just then Marko heard a girl scream. He was up and running before Old Hannah could stop him. Up two flights of stairs and down a long hall with the crone flying after him.

"Janet!" he cried.

He heard her call his name. He burst through a door, into a large room.

The screen had fallen to the floor. The two figures, dim because the screen, now off, had supplied most of the light, struggled together near the window. All he could see of her was her yellow hair.

He flung himself across the room. The struggling figures came apart, then there was the sudden shattering sound of breaking glass.

"Marko," she said. It was like a prayer, for what might have been, on her lips.

Then she fell through the window.

Blindly, not thinking, beyond rational thought, Marko threw himself at the other Martian. He knocked the man down with one blow, almost surprised that he could do it. The man got up. Marko knocked him down again. The man climbed unsteadily to his knees.

Finally—Marko did not know who had called them—the police came. They dragged him off the inert man and tried to hold him, but they could not. He went to the window and peered out. A bitter, cold wind whipped at his face.

At the bottom, in the alley, he could see her yellow hair framing her still head.

The life of the hospital moved about him. Hurrying nurses in crisp white uniforms, moving purposefully down the corridors. Doctors on silent feet. Hurrying. Hurrying. A vague smell of antiseptic. Others, like Marko, waiting grimly, uncertainly, nervously, anxiously, in despair.

"Mr. Marko," a voice called.

The nurse was an Earth girl with red hair. Marko was always surprised about the abundance of hair colors possible for Earth people. All Martian hair was dead white.

"I'm Marko."

"Your wife—"

So far they had told him nothing. Just to wait. The hours had trickled by, like sand in an hourglass marking the final few hours of his life.

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For, if she died, then his life was over . . .

"She—is she dead?" He could say the word. Dead. He expected an affirmative answer. Now, after seeing her yellow hair spread out fanlike about her head in the alley, the word had lost all meaning.

"She's had a bad fall," the nurse said. "Both her arms are broken. And one leg. She suffered a concussion of the brain."

"She's alive!" Marko gasped.

"She's alive. She wants to see you."

They went upstairs together.

The doctor was an elderly Martian with a kind face and smudges of overwork under his eyes. "Just a few moments," he said. He looked at Marko. "Be gentle."

The room was dark and absolutely silent. He saw the bed dimly, the huddled mound on it.

"Janet?"

She didn't answer him.

He went over to the bed. He reached out, then withdrew his hand. He couldn't touch her, now or ever, unless she said it was all right.

"Marko."

He stood there, stiffly.

"Marko, put your hand on my head. It's so warm."

Trembling from head to toe, he reached out and placed his hand on her brow.

"You came after me," she said. "After what I did. After how I acted."

"Don't try to talk, rest."

"Touch me again like that. I want to hold you. I want to never let you go. But I can't. My arms . . ."

He leaned over the bed and gently kissed her dry, hot brow, just touching his lips to it. Her shoulders moved. That was all.

"I never even gave you a chance," she said, crying.

"It was my fault. I rushed you too much."

"Rushed me? If . . . if I didn't have you now, if I had lost you . . ."

"Shh! You don't know what you're saying," he told her with a tired smile. "I don't expect your feeling for me to change. It doesn't matter. I'll care for you."

"You'll show me your farm. Everything. 'Ponics vats and all. I think—I know I'm going to love it."

He started to tell her about the kitchen.

She was weeping happily, a smile lighting up her whole face and tears streaming down her cheeks, when the doctor led him away.

THE END

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Rondell lied and cheated; he murdered and pillaged; he looked upon rape and carnage with the same unconcern with which he regarded suffering and want. This made him a completely normal person, because all Earth had become a—

SCHOOL FOR ASSASSINS

By ELLIS HART

RONDELL awoke all at once. Not in soggy sections after a sound sleep, but with a rigid awakeness, product of cold nightmares and the expectation of a footstep. The instant of awake brought an acute awareness of them outside the window.

Even before the metallic voice from the police copter shattered the early morning silence, he knew they were out there. Waiting for what? Or just waiting.

Then: "All right, Rondell. No fight, please! There are police officers out here who have children, there are others in this building . . . think of them. Don't make us blast! Come out slowly, with your hands clasped behind your neck or on top of your head." The cop was unsure of his words, and he fumbled the hand-position directions; Rondell grimaced. It had been a long, long time since these civilian cops had been pressed into service, since they had actually cornered a dangerous man who might give them trouble. All their drilling and pamphlets and fake hero-pride could not help them now, and they were scared. The frightened-animal tingle to the voice had told him all he wanted to know. Even alone—and how long he had been alone!—he was more than a match for them. Still . . . he should not feel overconfident. *That* might be a little bit dangerous.

The silly way they thought of their safe little homes, their children, their petty lives. He grinned hugely at them. Then, before he could stop it, a feeling of utter aloneness washed him.

He abruptly felt defeated, lost. Where was the end to all this? And was *this* to be his eventual end? Somebody not getting the jump on them when they found him? Dead from a police disruptor in a

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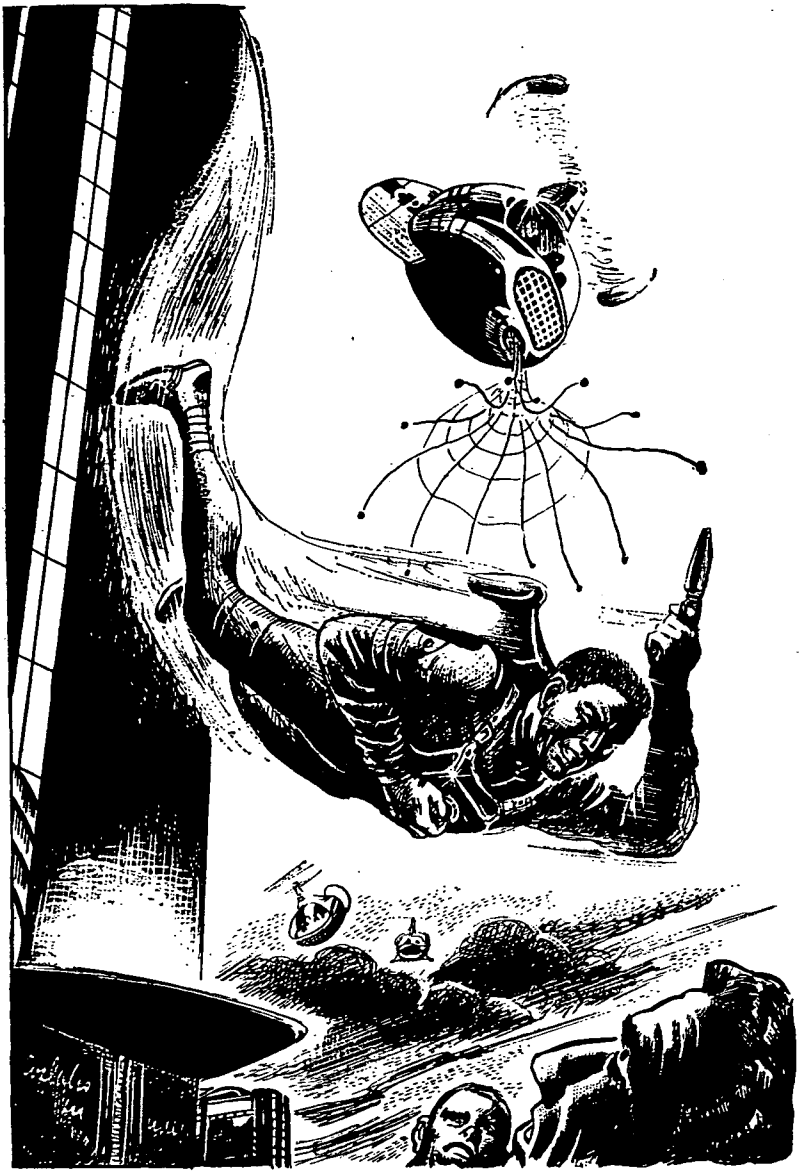

With deadly efficiency, they moved on Rondell from above and below.

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cheap hotel, with the cloak of an unsuccessful thief smothering him in his last moments? In the same instant he tightened mentally. Not here. Not this way. Perhaps soon, but at least in his own time, on his own terms.

Another blast of the public address megaphone clattered about the room as he stepped quickly to the closet, taking from a hook there the fly-belt and propulsor unit. Without wasted movements he strapped the units to his back and waist. Outside the door to his room he could hear the furtive, frightened steps of the civilian police, setting up riot disruptors in the hall, ready to spray the room through the door if he made it necessary.

He chuckled softly. They were bluffing and he knew it, but just *one* might tick the firing stud.

So I'll try not to make it necessary, he thought briskly, edging toward the window. He flattened himself against the wall, wishing he had not turned the windopaque to "full" the night before. If he could see out, gauge the proximity of the police copter hovering there, so many floors above the plasteel sidewalks, things would be easier.

He caught a reflection of himself in the mirror-window. The shortcut sandy hair, the squinting dark green eyes and the nose that was too short and nostril-high to be anything but animal-like. Not a good face, not a bad face, just a tired face.

He thought about the copter.

It was probably just above. He calculated rapidly in his mind. Thirty-two stories to the ground, the copter at least two floors above, reaction time of the pilot, speed of the sprayed web-nets, his own fleetness.

As an unexpected burst of the riot guns shattered the door, he bunched his muscles and threw himself through the window.

His finger tensed on the power button of the fly-belt but he did not jab. He fell rapidly, turning over, catching a glimpse of the police copter descending like a hunting falcon. The ship had paused only a few seconds, but it had been enough. Rondell looked down, forcing his eyes to remain open, despite the vertigo of his descent.

The slideway, crammed with first-shift casino-bettors reeled up beneath him. His stomach wrenched and he was uncertain whether he would be caught by the copter, die

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of fright and sickness, or smash to a pulp on the plasteel.

The screech of the diving copter, fast closing down on him, caused the pedestrians to glance up; their vision was held hypnotically; their wide, white stares registered clearly in Rondell's vision. A hundred yards above the slidestrip he jabbed wildly at the button, and the breath was instantly sucked from his lungs by the wrench of a slowing descent. The police vessel was directly behind him.

He continued to fall, knowing the ship would not endanger the pedestrians by a possible crash. He was aware that they could not pull out of too steep a dive.

The police ship veered off, casting out with its spinnarets the sticky web-netting in a final effort to capture him. But he was already out of range.

The nets shriveled into black little balls, hanging beneath the copter. Then they were sucked up into the spinnarets again.

Rondell swooped in over the pedestrian's heads, landing lightly, with knees bent. He killed the power being fed to the propulsor unit, ripped the instrument from him bodily, and threw it down between the speeding strips—all as one movement. Knife-switch reflexes paid off, and in a few moments of tiger-fast sprinting, leaping from strip to moving strip, he was lost in the crowded mass, hurrying to the casinos.

Once again the thief had escaped.

The window had not been opaqued and Rondell gazed in silence at the oily back of the Professor's fat, wattled neck. Though he could see only the huge blank bulk of the casino owner's tight-fitting silver-mesh, the thief was certain the Professor was twining. As he always twined. He was sure the fingers of those fat, perspiring hands were twisting one over the other, like many worms struggling for freedom.

Rondell was aware of a rising tide of hatred, boiling up from somewhere deep inside himself. Climbing organ over organ till he felt its heat in his face.

The Professor turned suddenly, his face blanching sheet-white, as the thief kicked in the window with a heavy-booted foot. The casino owner's eyes started from his pale face, reminding Rondell of a fish just hooked, still flapping.

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The fat man's hand darted for a row of silver-topped buttons on the desk, but the thief was even quicker. His hand, wrapped around the muzzle of a disruptor, smashed down brutally on the gambler's fingers. The fat man gave a soft, indrawn moan, a catch of the breath, and his eyes squinted shut with pain. He clutched his hand fiercely, rubbing the sausage fingers rapidly.

"Let's try to get on like compatriots, what say, lard belly," snapped Rondell, carefully noting the nostril-flare of anger at the reference to the Professor's bulk.

"I don't know where you came from, Rondell," wheezed the fat man, finding difficulty getting the words out, "but you'd better go back there. My guards are right outside that door, and they'll be in here in a moment."

Rondell sneered. "The room's soundproofed."

"You set off an alarm when you broke the window," he cocked his head at the shattered pane. He looked triumphant for a second. Then he saw the look in the thief's eyes.

"I'll let *you* phrase whatever it is you're going to say to keep them outside, Professor," Rondell replied levelly. He spoke softly. The menace was in every syllable. The casino owner tightened his lips a bit more.

They both started at the sound of an intercom buzzer.

"If I don't answer, they'll burn open the door."

"So answer. The gun is still here, though."

Rondell looked at the Professor with silent command and he waited.

The Professor's voice was unnaturally loud and strained as he thumb-depressed the intercom stud, but over the machine it would make no difference. "It's all right, boys," the fat man said quickly. "Just a fit of temper at how much Young Countess Kinderlee owes me. Afraid I broke the window with my table lighter. Don't worry about it, we'll have it fixed tomorrow. Go on back to your cards." He was sweating freely now, runners of perspiration trailing down into the collar of his silvermesh. The sounds of retreating footsteps came clearly over the intercom.

Rondell leaned over and pulled loose the suction-tips and wires leading to the machine. He threw the piece of equipment across the room, where it landed in a corner

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with a bounce and a clatter on its shatterproof case.

He stepped quickly to the door—keeping the disruptor trained quite steadily on the fat man—making sure it was triple-bolted and voice-keyed to "lock."

A few more steps and he had pulled down an emergency blind over the broken window, opaqued it. Then he dropped carefully into a formfit chair before the Professor's desk.

"How did they locate me, Professor?" It was simply a question, but the look of hatred on Rondell's face told the fat man the thief had already decided from where the information had come.

"I *had* to do it, Rondell. They would've closed me up!" He swiped at his rolled-fat jowls with a moist hand, his voice quivering.

The thief stifled a short, nasty laugh. "So you saved your greasy fat hide and threw me to the cops. Just to keep this joint running. Now is that the way to reward one of your best pupils? It was you, after all, who taught me everything I know." His voice dripped sarcasm, tinged with something deadlier. "Where would I be today, Professor, if it hadn't been for you?" Bitterness seeped into his voice, struck the fat man with nearly-physical force.

"How long do you think it'll be," the Professor wheezed, "before they look *here*? They must know you'd come after me. You'd better get out while you. . . ."

The words were cut off by the slash of the gun-barrel across the gambler's face. The gunsight raked flesh, and blood welled up thickly from his cheekbone. This time he made no sound, but his eyes glazed over momentarily from the extreme pain. He sank lower into his formfit, and it squawked beneath him. The whole obesity of him quaked in fear and agony.

Rondell's words paced out thinly. "I'm going to kill you. For twenty-eight years of running, I'm going to even it up. It took me five years to get back here from Sumatra . . . five years like an animal, and no reason for it! No reason!" Pain and a vital hatred poised in his tones. The hurt spilled out of him, and the fat man looked away, biting his lips.

It was obvious: the thief meant it all the way to his guts. He meant it more than anything . . . because he had been hurt too much.

The fat man stared up

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through tears of anguish at the rock that stood before him. Rondell was a big man, over six feet; strange that he was able to lose himself so completely in a crowd. His hair was light brown; the body that poised there was wire-taut, showing muscles and nerves strung to a never-sleeping alarm system topped by a brain of cunning. The green eyes were mere slits of piercing loathing.

Rondell was the last of his breed, a breed that had died out long ago. The last killer—thief in a world where murder and pillage were utterly pointless.

And the thief stared back.

He stared at the disgusting heap of protoplasm quaking in its silvermesh and luxury; symbol of a race he despised. The fat man had no backbone. A thin webbing of hair thrown scantily across a bald, furrowed head; fat drooping in folds over the already-stained collar of the silvermesh—worth Rondell's entire wardrobe and more. But no backbone, no guts. The fat man's face was pale, crossed here and there by scars from long-forgotten fights in a youth where violence was even then becoming unknown. Small crow's-feet radiated out from the piggish eyes. Eyes, oddly enough, not sunk in fat as they should have been. Eyes that occasionally looked even alert.

"You're going to die. How would you like to go?"

The Professor raised a hand feebly, tried to say something, but Rondell cut him off with a triumphant, "I have it. How fitting, fat man, how fitting.

"I think we'll put you away on one of your own games, Professor. I think we'll put you in the android bin. Or maybe the blackjack table? No, you never *did* like those pirhannas, so perhaps the roulette-table would be better."

The Professor's skin creamed out as he thought of the roulette tables—with their razor-sharp, double-edged scimitars — the blackjack table — with its computer-brain croupier and trapdoor seats that dropped away to the tanks below—or even best. . . .

He slid back in the seat, mute appeal on his oily face.

Rondell sat watching, not knowing *why* he was watching, nor why he had bothered to come here to even the score. It was hopeless; his whole life was hopeless. He had always been forced to come to the Professor when

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he hit snags too difficult to maneuver on his own—though those had been few and far between—but this time he knew the Professor had tipped the cops off. Why?

"You . . . wouldn't . . . kill . . . me?" the words were tremulous, the fat heaved in terror; the voice was an underground piping, shot through with querulous anguish.

"Kill you? *Kill* you?" Rondell slumped back into his formfit, ripples of laughter, uncontrolled, following him. "No," he drew the word out, prolonging it, hyping it with sarcasm, "no, that's the *last* thing I'd do to you, most honorable foster-daddy. I'm going to fête you, cover you with perfumes and flowers and offer you sweetmeats, I'm going to offer you my last credit, I'm going to . . . *I'm going to laugh while you die, fat man!*

"You lousy, stinking . . ." he groped for the word, ". . . *fagin!*"

The fat man's eyes opened a fraction wider, his mouth drooled a bit of slippery froth, he mumbled, "I'd never have done it, if I'd known it would come to . . ."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. I said nothing. Don't kill me."

Rondell knew instantly that the Professor was covering something. The fat man had started to say something, had realized he had gone too far, and had tensed inside. He seemed to draw together like the pursestrings of a fine leather pouch. He stopped shaking, as though he had found some inner strength to depend upon.

"Perhaps," the Professor added, nothing but a trace of fear left in his voice, "if we had had space travel, boy, but not now. Too late now."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. I mean nothing. I'm an old man, I'm too tired to *mean* things. But I don't want to die."

"You'll die."

"I know, but I don't want to die. I have to say I don't want to die. I have to say it so you'll know."

Rondell laughed harshly. "Know? Believe me, Professor, I *know* you don't want to die. But there's got to be an evening-up."

Inside himself, Rondell asked: *What did he mean by that? There* was *no space travel, and there never* could *be.* Space was a stop sign for Man. Madness lay out there, so it was a palm held up flat, toward Earth. Go no further.

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There *was no* space travel; what did the fat man mean?

A slow, frightening smile slid over the killer's face. "Tell your boys to close up shop for the day."

"But I just opened. The first-shift isn't even here an hour."

"I said close. Now, close."

The Professor's eyes bulged. "C-close up the Casino. But I'll—I'll lose a fortune."

"You'll lose your life if you don't."

There was no arguing with that frightful smile, that hand on the disruptor. The Professor started to rise from behind his desk, paused as Rondell's detaining finger pointed at him.

"Use the emergency clear-out button. No personal contact."

The Professor smiled thinly. "You remember that."

"I remember a lot of things. I should. You brought me up in this sinkhole."

The Professor sank down again heavily. He hesitated a moment longer, nervously pulling at his pendulous lower lip. Rondell added, softly, "Go, ahead, *Dad,* we don't want to waste all the credits spent on that elaborate rig, do we now? *Jump!*" His voice changed in an instant from acid sarcasm to the raw sting of command. The fat man started visibly.

He ran a hand through the air over a light-brown block set into the desktop, and a square section rose up, with a button set in one wall. He pressed the button. The thief watched with narrowed eyes. One mismovement, and the fat man would have been splattered.

The fat man kept his finger on the button a moment longer, finally sagged back in complete defeat. His hands went back to the finger-twining movements. "It's done," he breathed.

Rondell's skin itched. After twenty-eight years of calculated corruption on the part of the Professor . . . the score was going to be evened.

"Like to lay odds on how fast you'll die?" he asked.

The Professor did not answer.

It was not the kind of question to *be* answered.

"How long will it take?" He added, "To clear out?"

The Professor was breathing hard now. "It took less than thirty minutes, a fire scare three weeks ago."

The fat man was hunched forward, his belly indented by the curve of the desk; his eyes

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never left the thief's hands. Not the face . . . simply the hands.

Rondell sat back, idly toying with the disruptor; each twirl and stroke caused the fat man to pale, and a strange flame to dance higher in the younger man's eyes.

"Why don't you just kill me and have done?"

"You mean here? Now?"

"It's soundproofed! You know that! Why are you tormenting me?"

Rondell stopped his idle movements, leaned forward and fixed the huge man with an uncompromising glare. "Because you found me in an orphanage when I was too young to do anything about it, and turned me into the most worthless thing on Earth. A thief, murderer—in an age when it is pointless!"

The fat man swallowed hard, with difficulty.

"So I'm going to get full measure, Professor. Full fathom five to pay me back for twenty-eight years. Nineteen years of your careful training. Three years of stealing jewelry I could get from the Cornucopia for less trouble. One year in preparation for the Change Chamber, before I escaped, and five years hiding in Sumatra.

"It's hot there, Professor. *Very* hot there."

"They should have the main play-rooms cleared by now," the fat man said, incongruously.

His perspiring fingers clung madly to one another, twining.

"Remorse doesn't look so well on you, Professor," Rondell snapped. "It looks belated. Twenty-eight years belated." He was making idle conversation till the casino was emptied of its first-shift patrons, but there was more, there was an urgency in his voice. As though he had to know the answers before it was too late.

"Why did you do it, Professor? Why pick *me* off an orphanage floor and louse up my life? What's the motive?"

The Professor remained silent.

A mute pleading wallowed in his eyes.

Rondell lapsed into a moody silence; he turned the answers he had found himself—unsatisfactory answers, wrong answers—over and over in his mind. Like a ribbon of flickfilm the incidents of his childhood fled before his mind.

His memory before the orphanage—not the crèche, so he had obviously had a mother and father—was a blank.

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He had no recollection of mother, father, home, or early days. He knew there was *something* back before the age of three, but whatever shadowy images remained, they were blown and worn away by the continual routine of the orphanage.

Then the Professor had come, had seemed to know just who he was seeking. Then the days with the Professor. There had never been another name. No first nor last—merely the Professor. The Professor, always omnipresent.

Rondell remembered the day of his twelfth birthday. He had learned many strange things from the fat man: the use of a length of black silken cord, disruptor firing with great accuracy, boxing, jiujitsu, deep-breathing and exercises. Many things that did not seem to make sense to the twelve year old Rondell. But on that day, something began to take form. A pattern was established.

On that day, when Rondell had been a tall boy—even for that age—when the Professor had looked at him across dwarf-grapefruit and a flowering napkin under the fat man's chin, the thing had begun in earnest.

"Good breakfast, boy?" the fat man had asked.

"Um," Rondell had managed to mouth around a chunk of grapefruit.

"Do you want to make me happy, Rondell? Would you like to do me a favor?" He had posed the questions lightly, almost airily, and the boy had smiled, the grin denting dimples in his fair cheeks. Then he had bob-headedly nodded yes.

The fat man had pulled the napkin from under his chin, settled back in his chair which slid a few inches away from the breakfast table on its rods to allow for the extra bulk, and begun twining his fingers.

He had wheezed a long breath of contemplation, gazed at the far upper corner of the gigantic dining-room (a room that said *wealth*, then said it again, never quite subsiding into silence, but offering and re-offering the evidence of it), and cleared his throat.

He clearly enunciated: "Do you know the lady we visited last night?" He had spoken with an elaborate simplicity. His tones and manner were directed with exaggerated evenness, even for a child of twelve. He spoke as though it were the most important thing he had ever said, and

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he wanted the boy to miss no part of it.

"Yes, I remember," Rondell had said, without fully waiting to think whether he remembered or not.

The Professor was careful. "No, I mean do you *really* remember? Do you remember the beautiful red jewel she wore in her forehead?"

The boy had considered for a moment, then nodded quickly. His dark-green eyes were soft and sparkling. He recalled the monstrous flash of the jewel where it had glowed like a third eye in the center of his hostess' forehead.

"Well, Rondell, that was the Lady Cindy of Upper Pittsburg, and I want you to get me that jewel. I want that forehead-ruby."

It had been let out at last.

Now Rondell began to realize why he had been taught such things as walking catlike on the balls of the feet, how to dress to blend with his surroundings, how to scale a glass-smooth wall, how to use a vibro-blade and a disruptor. The Professor was a clever man, and this had been a clever plan. Step by step, taking time and caution, it had come to this, and the boy had been ready.

The Lady Cindy of Upper Pittsburg was indeed shocked to find a hooded, completely black-garbed man of indeterminate age, curled up comfortably on the balcony outside her casement. Idly running his skin-gloved fingers down the barrel of a disruptor. Her amazement was doubled as he commanded in a youthful, shaking voice, "Open your wall vault. The lock is located in the right upper knob of your bedpost. I want your ruby. And hurry it up."

Her eyes widened, and then she realized it *must* be a joke. *No* one stole these days. Not for a *long* time had anyone stolen anything. Not with the government Cornucopias so available. Why, that was where *she* had gotten the ruby from originally.

She shrugged out of her radium-dyed heliotrope mink stole, letting it fall to the deep pile rug, and answered, "I have no idea how you got there, but I suggest you leave at once!" Her accent was a queer half-snort, half-haughty command.

Then her eyes drew down, and her lashes fluttered. "On the other hand . . . if you want to stop this foolishness about my ruby, you can come in, and we can have a drink and . . ."

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Her eyes wandered to the deep foam-pile bed.

That was the first time Rondell glimpsed the utter decay of his world . . . without fully realizing what it meant. Her body was encased by a tight silken sheath that more set off her physical attributes than hid them. She strained against the sheath, and a fire of excitement and challenge burned in her contact lenses.

Rondell had been too young, but even so . . . something had made him ill inside. "I'm not fooling . . ." his voice was slightly unsure, unsteady; his first job, ". . . I want that ruby. *Now!*" The Lady Cindy of Pittsburg had a sudden realization: this boy was not here for her erotic pleasure at all. Her eyes widened incredulously.

"*Well!* I—I—am I to take it that this is—a—a—" she struggled with a nearly-forgotten word, "—a *robbery*?"

The boy nodded his head, and through the eye-slits she could see a confused desperation in his eyes.

"But—but *why?* You can get one just as good—though I confess, not *better*—from the Cornucopia. You *have* a CornuKey, haven't you? There's no need for you to take it from me. I get such pleasure from it. Why?" She was now flinging her arms about in exaggerated bewilderment, her voice rising.

The thief seemed to be getting unnerved by her reactions. "Stop that! Stop screaming!" But she did *not,* and he leaped agilely from the window-seat, brandishing the disruptor with calm deadliness.

"The vault. The vault. Get the ruby for me or I'll kill you." There was a hardness in his youthful voice that told her she was faced by a boy not quite a boy.

She turned, and looking over her shoulder at the thief, walked slowly to the bed. Reluctantly she twisted the ornate ball atop one bedpost. The ball split in the center. It revealed a voice-control sphere. She spoke into it softly, and watched with creases lining her forehead as a portion of the wall slid up to reveal an elaborate set of bureau drawers.

It was not hiding the jewels from the world, protecting them, but merely an evidence of possession, a feeling of *I know where they are, but no one else does.*

Now the boy stepped nimbly forward, began to open the jewel drawers. Abruptly, the Lady Cindy decided some-

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thing she had been pondering for several minutes. She was not going to be robbed by this child. She moved back to the voice-control sphere, quietly.

Before she could whisper the words that would lower the plasteel wall, sealing the thief into the airtight vault, Rondell turned and saw her. "Stop!" he said.

The Lady Cindy's words were half out of her mouth when the boy pressed the disruptor stud. His face, under the hood, went sick and white as he saw the result. The Lady Cindy soundlessly exploded into a million fragments . . .

. . . her body exploded—imploded — then exploded again.

The boy ripped the mask from his face, and leaned against the bedpost. He became violently ill. The Professor had never quite said what a disruptor would do. Block-targets were not blonde, statuesque women. The Professor had merely said it would stop opposition. It certainly did.

When the sickness passed, keeping his eyes from what ran on the walls, he found the ruby, slid it into his seal-pouch, and left by the window as he had come.

The Professor received the ruby with gratitude.

"Excellent, my boy. Excellent. What's that? Dead? Oh, well, I'm sure these things happen. Now, for your *next* assignment . . ."

The years of running, the years of harrying had begun.

Rondell's thoughts snapped back violently. He was in the present, and the Lady Cindy of Upper Pittsburg was many years dead. He was sitting in the Professor's office in the casino where he had spent nineteen years of his life. He was holding a disruptor on the man who had first taught him to kill. The ruby, too, was long-since gone. Poured down some invisible drain, no benefit gained from the theft, nothing bettered by killing an innocent woman. Nothing derived from it all, but that Rondell had taken the first big step in a life composed of stealing, killing, hiding.

In an era so smug with wealth and ease that thievery was not only unknown, it was unnecessary, Rondell had been systematically corrupted, changed into a thief. Rondell had known no better, and to steal seemed a thing singularly tantalizing and adventurous. He was capable of doing something no one else could do. He was a master workman at a trade everyone

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else had forgotten. Until it had become second-nature. Until there came with violating the peace of his culture, a sting of life he could find nowhere else.

With the constant beating and running and hiding.

What reasons had moved the fat man—wealthy beyond most men's dreams—to do this thing? Not even the nineteen years in the Professor's home and casino had been able to show Rondell any sense to it.

But through it all, Rondell had come forth, hating the terribly overcrowded and decadent world in which he moved. Despising it, and dragging himself deeper, deeper.

"I despise you!" Rondell suddenly blurted, without preamble. He sank back into silence, and the Professor stared at the thief's face.

A gong sounded in the desk.

Rondell sat up straight. The casino was empty, the henchmen of the Professor had gone, too. The robot-sealers had examined the place, and it was empty.

"Let's go," Rondell said, motioning with the disruptor.

The Professor slid the chair back on its tracks, and got up heavily.

The air stank with death.

The casino never closed, and to facilitate the handling of patrons, pleasure-bent, everyone possessed a shift-card, designating what times they might play. For had the cards *not* been issued, the casinos would have been permanently swamped. For they were anything but mere gambling halls. The players bet against their opposite number, who was an android. If they won, the android was killed by them, in any one of a hundred different, clever ways . . . artificial blood spurted, shrieks were emitted, androids that looked real, died. The losers died also.

But then, the humans only had a three-to-one chance of winning anyhow. Behind every casino was a government agency that supported the concern. For it was one certain way of decreasing the staggering population. Let them *play* themselves to death, for with the agenol drugs, few people died of anything but violent deaths.

But give them their kicks . . . let them kill or be killed . . . and they would die gladly.

The casino was dead silent. The Professor walked before Rondell, and the cold fear in him hardened like a block of ice. If he had thought there

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would be any escape, all hope was now lost. The sound of their footfalls was stark and loud in the empty casino. With the crowds gone, with the hypnolights and adverts shut off, it was a dead, hungry, waiting place. The Professor shivered; he had never seen it like this. The place never closed, it was always full.

It was closed, it was empty.

He was going to die.

Over thirty years the plan; wasted.

Warning lights high up the filigreed walls cast light silver shadows along the floor. Signs of occupancy from a few minutes before still remained: crushed cigbutts littered the floor (and as they walked, the scurryers slipped from their wall-nests, began sucking up the debris), stacks of chips made crazy pillars on the tables, bits of simulated cartilage from the gaming-androids remained plastered to the betting-boards. Even as they walked into the center of the gaming-room, the last trickle of fake blood swirled down the clean-out troughs with a gurgle.

The hall was strung with multi-colored drapes that changed color constantly under the silver warning lights. The furnishings were rich and padded. *Just like the customers,* thought Rondell wryly. He spat on the floor, and a scurryer swept up, sucked it spotless in an instant. He kicked at it viciously, then swung on the fat man, "No move. I'll forego my fun and take you out right here."

They paused before the deadly bingo game.

The Professor drew back, and Rondell grasped him tightly by his flabby, soft-middle bicep. "Eh?" Rondell suggested nastily, cocking a thumb at the table. "What do you say to a game of bingo, Professor? What do you say to that?"

The Professor paled, and Rondell nudged him sharply with the needle-nose of the disruptor. "Sit."

The Professor stepped up to the table. It was a huge circular cannister affair, over ten feet high. The sides were sealed, and a small stairway led up to the seats and the tabletop proper. The game was so arranged that if the android opponent — operated by robot-brain — won the bingo card, the chair dropped away beneath the human, sending him into the bottom eight feet of the cannister.

Filled with pirhana fish.

Rondell walked the fat man

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up the steps, and strapped him into a chair without ceremony. "I think I'll even give you a fighting chance, fat man," Rondell pointed out, as he found the control box for the game.

He smashed it open with the heavy handle of a vibro-blade taken from his boot-top, and fingered several dials. The game board lit up, and the button panels went on. But the robot-brain remained inactive.

Rondell switched on the selectron, which called the numbers from random sequences, and took a seat himself. He did not strap in. *"I'm* going to play you, instead of an android, Professor. That way you'll have a real incentive to win." Then he switched on the robot-brain.

The Professor put up a shaking hand. "No. You must not! I—I . . ." He subsided into silence, and nodded. The game began.

Rondell punched out a code on the selector before him. A "card" of numbers appeared in the plate beneath his hand. He sat back and watched the Professor as the fat man did the same. The Professor seemed to want to say something, but he pursed his lips and was silent.

The robot-brain clicked its patterns, and ran the codes through, and then the speaker in the center of the game table spoke sharply, harshly:

"I-16."

Rondell looked down. Nothing. That was not on his card. He glanced across at the Professor. The fat man also missed that one. A reflective mirror above the player's place showed what was and was not lit.

The robot-brain ran through its patterns again, clicked and spoke, "B-33."

Again, nothing. Rondell looked up. The Professor had one. Upper left hand corner. That was a start, and for the first time, Rondell suspected he might lose. But it did not matter in the slightest. For Rondell was intending to win —one way or another. If the Professor got too close, the thief would leave the game, walk around the rim, and use the disruptor. The Professor had schooled his pupil well; Rondell would take no chances, he was *of* the jungle, and he lived by the *rules* of the jungle. Strike hard and strike first.

"B-7."

Nothing lit on Rondell's board, nothing lit on the Professor's board-mirror. The fat man leaned forward against

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the playing edge, and his fingers twined madly. He strained against the plasteel bonds that held him in the game. In the center of the tabletop was a clear frame of plastic, and through it, by a clever series of lights, could be seen the deadly fish, swimming, swimming, swimming below them.

"O-40."

A ding! brought Rondell's eyes to his own board. He now had a square lighted in the end-row center of his own card.

"Rondell." He looked up and the fat man was leaning forward even more. Perspiration dotted the fat man's upper lip, and his eyes were tight with fright. "You must listen to me . . ."

"B-28."

". . . you must hear me, Rondell." His hands made vague, futile movements. "You have to hear me out."

Rondell played his card. He rang a stud for lowered odds. If his number came up, he was in good shape . . . if it did not, he was one score down. Down toward the fish. But since he could not lose, it did not matter what chances he took.

He rang the odds down to 3-to-1 which was as good as a human could ring in the entire casino. The brain clicked its patterns, chuckled to itself, said, "O-12." It was a hit. That made two out of five in a vertical stripe down the right hand side. The center one, and now this one.

"Rondell!" the fat man pleaded. "Listen to me! It's not—not just my *dying* I'm trying to prevent. You've got to hear me out!"

"O-29," but it was nothing.

"You want to know why I did it to you. You *must* want to know. You must have wondered why I turned you into a social outcast! I can tell you, only stop this game *now!*"

"I-58."

"Keep talking, Professor," Rondell snapped, trying to play the card and listen to the fat man at the same time. He wanted to know, all right. He wanted to know very much; more than anything, perhaps. But the smell of death was so strong.

"The answer, Rondell! The answer. Let me go, and I'll tell you who you must see to get the answer! There's reason to it, boy. Believe me, there's reason to it."

"I-26," and the second one of a left-to-right angle corner-to-corner stripe lit. The Professor now had three lit. One had rung while Rondell had

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been distracted thinking, but the third one did not matter. It was out of the pattern entirely.

"What kind of reason?" Rondell asked tightly. "Like why you took me from the orphanage, like the tie-up with no space travel? Like why you tipped off the police I was in the city, in that hotel? Like why you've kept me running for twenty-eight years?"

"Yes, yes, all of that, and—"

"G-14."

"—and more. You can't understand. It's been thirty years and more in the coming. You've got to let me free! *You've* got to get off the game, Rondell, *Rondell!* Listen to—"

"G-38."

"—listen to me. Do it now."

Both their boards were lit with many squares, and now Rondell's mind was a tangled mass. He could not figure it all out. All the weight of the universe pressed down on him. Tied in with his overwhelming hatred for the fat man, and his desire for revenge. He had come half across the world to get the fat man. He had been double-crossed again; how the fat man had known he was in town, was something Rondell did not care to worry about. But the Professor had turned the police loose, and they had made him run again. Now he wanted to stop running. Now he wanted to find out why he had been persecuted. What his past was, and why it tied in with this fat man, and what his future held.

He slipped from the chair.

It was two short steps to the brain-box, but before he got there, a final click and ding! sounded from above, and the chair where he had been seated dropped away.

He shivered at the sound of water splashing from below, and turned off the game. The Professor had been one square short of a loss . . . he had filled a line completely.

Bingo!

He went back up and held the disruptor near the fat man's nose. "Tell me."

"Go to the Slum. Find a woman named Elenessa on Broad Street. Number 6627A."

"If this is a trick, Professor, if this is something to get me captured, if this is a stall for time . . . I'll get back here. I'll get back, you know that. Inside you know I'll even it, Professor."

Then he was gone.

The Professor was still tied

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to the seat, but his face had settled back into a shrewd, relieved smile. He had stalled it just long enough. Let Rondell run some more . . . just as he had forced him to run for twenty-eight years.

The running would soon come to an end.

"Now, boss?" came the voice of a casino worker, from behind the draperies.

The Professor called out, "Yes. Get me off here."

The worker came out; a thin-faced little man with a bobcut hairdo. "I got the signal on the clear-out sequence. I knew you wanted someone to wait behind and keep watch. I had *this* on him all the time," he held up an ancient projectile weapon. "Coulda' plugged him any time. Want me to get the clops on the vid?"

The Professor turned on his saviour with a fierce expression. He snarled, "No. And forget what happened tonight if you want to keep your shift-card. Got it?"

The worker nodded his head briskly. The card was important to him; without it, no kicks.

The Professor went back into the office, and passed his fingertips over a section of wall. His prints were instantly recognized, and a section slid up, revealing a private vid. He studded out a number, left the vision off, and said succinctly:

"It will have to be tonight. Three A.M. Have the Dirt get to them. At her place, in thirty minutes."

A short sharp word acknowledged the message.

"Thirty years and more, and almost done," the Professor said to no one at all, clicking the vid off. The wall slid back down, and he fell into his seat. It rocked beneath him, and held him as he sat in misery and loneliness. His fat a bulwark against the chill that crept in softly and healthily.

In an age where wealth and opulence were commonplaces, the people had maintained the Slum for kicks. It was fake and japery from one end to the other. It made people feel good to think there were still areas of mystery and intrigue, places where people poorer than themselves lived. The set-up, so the Slum was always full, was too involved for any one man to understand, but Rondell knew one family out of every four got the "call" to go to the Slum for a one year term, every month. A constant turnover, and more kicks in a section

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of phony dives and trumped-up excitement.

Through this sideshow Slum, Rondell stalked.

Quietly, softly, like a black cat in a blacker alley. He found 6627A Broad Street without difficulty. It was a walk-up next to a place laughingly called The Hang-Dog Roost. He went up quickly, having found the name he sought on a plate downstairs. The door to the apartment was no trouble . . . an old-style slide-bolt he cut with the vibroblade.

Moonlight streamed down through a high window, and he could see the squallor typical of these artificial dumps. In the bed, a woman with dark-black-almost-blue-black hair slept, lying on her arm.

He crept toward the bed, and hardly realized for a moment after the needle-nose was aimed at his head, that it was in her hand.

"Who are you?" she snapped. "Who sent you? What are you doing here?"

Her face was half-shadowed by the moonlight's angle of entrance, but even in the light he could see she was hard-featured. Not particularly good-looking at all . . . in fact rather eagle-nosed and high-browed, but her naked body, gleaming in the dusk of the flat, was high-breasted and wire-tight. She had deep lines in her face, much like his own, and he could see a certain *simpatico* in her eyes.

He told her quickly who he was, and from where he had come, and for how long he had been running. He did not know *why* he told her, but he did. And it was good to speak of it completely. He hid nothing, and as he talked quietly, the disruptor lowered.

Then she spoke to him. Her name was Elenessa, and she, too, had been running for a long, long time. As long as he. And her circumstances had been the same. The constant harrying by the society, on all sides. And a man named Zalenkoz, who was comparable in background to the Professor.

They sat and talked, and in a while, they knew each other. Better than a thousand years together, they knew what was under the skin and in the head of each. So they were mated in mind when the rat-faced man knocked at the door.

Elenessa had thrown a wrap around herself. She sat on the edge of the bed, and when the knock came, she started violently. "Cops," she

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suggested. He shrugged and pulled the disruptor from its magnogrip at his side. He motioned to her to open the door, and slipped silently behind the doorframe.

Elenessa walked quite as catlike as he did, and when she threw open the door, the rat-faced man standing there was caught so unaware, he did not have time to conceal the fact that he had been picking his nose.

A simple-minded grin flickered across his face, and his nose twitched very much as a gopher's would. "Dirt's the name," he explained. "I was sent by—"

Rondell was around the door, and the disruptor was leveled at the ridiculous little Slum dweller. "Get in here," Rondell snapped. "And I'll see if it's worthwhile letting you live."

The rat-faced little man thrust his hands into the air, rapidly, and his eyes grew large. "Hey, lissen, don't get cute wit' that t'ing. I'm onny doin' what I was paid ta do. A big fat guy and a guy with real black hair an' a beard paid me—"

Elenessa broke in startledly, "That sounds like your Professor and Zalenkoz."

Rondell motioned with the disruptor for the man named Dirt to finish what he had been saying. "They paid me to come and fetch ya," he said shortly.

"What do you mean, 'Fetch us,' " Rondell asked.

The little man spread his hands, and then started to reach into a side pocket. "Hold it," Rondell commanded.

"Just a piece of paper, chief, that's all," Dirt said.

"Just the same, hold it." Rondell went to him, felt in the man's pocket, and came up with a slip of paper. "This it?" The little man nodded.

"That's it, Chief."

Rondell unfolded it, and across the top was printed:

From the Desk of the Professor
Casino Row

The paper had an address written on it. An address far uptown in the palatial Salazzo Plaza area. "This was where you were supposed to lead us?" Rondell inquired.

"That's right, boss. I got two extra hours added on my card for the job, so ya better lemme take ya, or I'll lose that time at the tables."

"Sure," Rondell answered, understandingly.

Then they trussed Dirt up,

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and prepared to find the place themselves.

For Elenessa was certain she would find the answer to the harrying, also. Somewhere uptown.

In a tower in Salazzo Plaza.

The tower was an alabaster one, rising out of the night like a white fang, deadly and silent. High up, ringing its top, a gigantic wheel of jewels sparkled against the night skyline of white and black and gold. Whoever lived here, there was no doubting his wealth.

Rondell had no trouble with the door. The vibroblade slid across the maglock and the door slid open also. Inside it was darker than the night without. Rondell unclipped a lighter from his pouch-fold, and held it up, casting its sharp, thin light around. The place was empty. In the center of the room stood a droptube, leading up to the other floors.

They slipped inside, and closed the door behind them. Rondell led the way, with Elenessa directly behind him, her step assured, the disruptor ready. They came into the center of the floor, stopped, looked around to orientate themselves. It was silence on silence.

Then they started toward the droptube . . .

Except they could not move . . .

Their feet were rooted, their bodies stoned immobile.

Lights went on. Suddenly, glaringly, alarmingly, lights flooded everything, and they were standing in the middle of a tensor-field. Beneath their feet an impregnated grid showed up through the total-conductivity floor. From the ceiling, vaulted high and gold above them, the nozzles of tensor machines protruded, and from their snouts came the faint, high buzz of the directional ion-beams.

A speaker concealed somewhere in the walls *whiffed*, as though someone were blowing into it, to make sure it was on. Then a voice came through.

"Sorry to have to trick you, but we were quite certain you would not come of your own volition. Not after the way we've treated you."

"Zalenkoz!" Elenessa screamed, straining motionlessly at the invisible bonds holding her.

"Yes, my child," he replied through the speaker, "the one man you despise."

"Let me free! Let me free! I'll kill him, I'll kill him!" she screamed, and Rondell was

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forced to snap a sharp word at her. She subsided into a wary, flaring silence.

"So good-bye," Zalenkoz said briefly.

A plate slid back in the ceiling, and the convoluted shape of a weird machine rolled down on tracks, till it was aimed directly at them from above. They heard a switch being knifed down, through the speaker, and knew that wherever he was in the tower, Zalenkoz had turned the weird machine on.

A blue ray shot from the mouth of the machine, bathed them, clothed them with a strange tingling of the skin.

Rondell caught a glimpse of Elenessa from the corner of his paralyzed eyes. She was fading.

"Stop!" he screamed. "Stop! We deserve to know! Why are you killing us? I was told the answer was here! We *deserve* to know!"

The machine stopped, and Elenessa slowly came back to solidarity. She was terribly frightened. It showed in her face, even frozen the way it was. "You—you were getting dim, like you were disappearing," she breathed.

He nodded, and shhed her. Through the speaker, with someone's hand imperfectly over the mike, they could hear Zalenkoz speaking to someone else. Then sounds of agreement, and Rondell heard a familiar voice.

"Rondell—"

"*You!*" the thief screamed, straining futilely at nothing. "Again you tricked me, again, again . . ."

Fury boiled up raw and hot in his belly. Had he been free, every inch of plasteel comprising the tower would have shattered beneath his fists as he tore them about to find the man.

"Rondell, let me speak," the Professor's voice overrode the noise. "Let me speak, Rondell, because we have only a matter of three—what is it, Zalenkoz, four minutes and a few seconds . . . thanks—four minutes. You have to go through now, or the juncture points won't be merged for another six months.

"And frankly, in your present state of mind, I'm afraid we couldn't satisfactorily hold you two for that long."

Rondell seethed, he struggled. At last, to die like this. Obviously, the Professor was getting rid of him, to remove the danger to himself. But how did Elenessa and this Zalenkoz figure in. He was abruptly confused. Immobile,

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he was helpless, and for the first time in his life, though he was deprived of being able to fight back, he felt at rest. Peace, at last.

Even if it was only the peace of death.

"Now you must listen to me, you two. You must listen carefully to everything I say. I don't expect you to love us, or even completely understand our motives—certainly not feel we were justified."

What the hell was he talking about? Rondell wondered impatiently.

The Professor explained: "You've seen the world outside. Sick with its own wealth, fat with its overcrowdedness, and trapped on Earth, because spaceflight is impossible. Trapped, and rotting.

"Over thirty years ago, Zalenkoz and I found the key to a solution. The temporal-shift. Not time, precisely, but something more involved. Something like worlds within worlds, though not quite *that*, either. Picture the Earth and make it two dimensional, like a paper cut-out. Then behind it, like two leaves of a book, another Earth. And another behind that. On and on and on, endlessly, an uncountable number of Earths—in fact an uncountable number of *universes*—one after another, each slightly different, each waiting to be discovered.

"So we worked, and we found a way to slip a person through. But what good did it do us? No one would go. There was a world choking with overpopulation, and everyone so decadent and smug, they would never risk their lives to try a new frontier.

"So we thought of kidnapping them and sending them through. We tried it twice . . . and neither time did they live out a day. These aren't easy worlds, some of them. They are Earth . . . but a *different* Earth.

"We had to build our own pioneers. We had to create the right kind of person to live in a rugged new environment. So we got you, each of you, and separately went about ruining you for this culture. It was cruel, and it was unrewarding, and don't think we didn't suffer as much as you—but in a different way. Now you're each ready. The harrying has turned out some fine stock. If you succeed, there will be others, and there may still be some hope for this rotting planet.

"Do you understand?"

They understood, and their hatred was even greater.

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"You did it to us . . . to satisfy your own desire to invent! You used us as guinea pigs!" Rondell screamed.

Then the machine went on again.

He had to know one thing . . . he yelled once more, just before dematerializing, "Who are my parents? Where did I come from?"

And the Professor answered, "I—can't—tell—you."

Then they were gone.

The room was silent, and the machine stopped its ray. Then, through the speaker, hardly realizing it was still on, came the sound of a grown man crying. Then the voice of Zalenkoz, soothing the other, and Zalenkoz saying, "What is it they say? I think it was Shakespeare. 'It is a wise father who knows his own child.' What do you think, Professor . . . does the reverse apply?"

The fat man did not answer.

While on some Earth, somewhere, a man named Rondell and a woman named Elenessa found themselves in a heavy-foliaged jungle. Even as they stood watching what had happened to them, a weird saber-toothed beast leaped at them.

Twin disruptors came out, but were no good as the beast sprang past and knocked the girl to the ground. Rondell had his vibroblade drawn, and was on the beast's back in a moment.

Soon, there was quiet.

Alone, the man and woman who had run for a long, long time. Alone, with the worlds to conquer,

And they would not bother with anything as ridiculous as calling themselves Adam and Eve.

THE END

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MOON OF DEATH

By E. K. JARVIS

The obstacles in Ronson's path put his chances of survival at zero. But he had to remain alive or a world would die.

SHADOWS were falling on the huge world of Viron as Lee Ronson made his way through the market place. It was getting along toward nightfall and Demerong, the prison moon, the moon as big as Earth and twice as evil, was climbing in the sky.

The molded plastic of his face mask itched, but Ronson kept his hand in his pocket, clenched around the ultragun. He resisted the temptation to rip away the mask and reveal to all that he was an Earthman. It would be sure death. They would tear him apart in seconds.

Friction between Earth and Viron was at its worst now. The cold war that had spread over half the galaxy had come to a peak with the brutal murder of the eight hapless Terran traders on Viron a month before. Ronson knew he was taking his life in his hands by coming to the big world, even disguised as he was behind the pocked mask of a Netralite.

But someone has to do the job, he told himself grimly.

The marketplace was closing down for the night now. Ronson passed counters of vile-smelling Vironian vegetables rotting after a day's neglect, and turned down a dark side-street. The palace of Thetlang D'hu was visible up ahead. Ronson felt the slight bulge of the mind-tapper against his thigh, and tensed.

"If you're caught, we can't help you," they told him on Earth. "An agent of Solar System Police doesn't have

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The prisoners were pushed off brutally—sent hurtling to the prison planet below.

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any call spying on an alien out-system world."

"I know. I won't ask for help if I'm caught."

"Don't. You won't get it."

That was hardly a comforting conversation for Ronson to recall as he drew closer to the Overlord's palace. He knew the Vironians would show no mercy if they discovered a spy from Earth. His only hope, if caught, was that they wouldn't bother to look beneath his disguise. There was no official death penalty on Viron; natives and friendly aliens caught in criminal acts were merely banished to Demerong, the prison moon. Posing as a Netralite, he stood a chance. As an Earthman, none.

He huddled for a moment in an alleyway as a Peace Officer came by, swinging his heavy neuron-whip. Then he moved ahead. The palace grounds began a block ahead.

He wouldn't need to get inside the palace himself; not if he could plant the mind-tapper in a useful position. As he drew near, he slid the tiny needle that was the mind-tapper's transmitter out of his pocket and into the palm of his hand. He cupped it; then he drew a platinum five-munit piece from his other pocket and put it in the same hand.

A Vironian guard stood at the entrance to the palace, brandishing a deadly ultra-wave rifle. The guard looked at Ronson coldly, yellow eyes flickering in the blue face.

"Yes, Netralite?"

"I would see the Overlord, guard."

"Thetlang D'hu will see no one at this hour, outworlder."

Ronson smiled. "I have important information for him. Information about Earth." Grinning wolfishly, he raised his hand so the five-munit piece glittered momentarily in the bright moonlight. "This is yours if you can arrange an interview for me."

The guard glanced at the coin, which represented two weeks' pay for him. "I'll talk to the Overlord's private secretary about it. You wait here." The guard extended a hand, and Ronson pressed the coin into it, at the same time forcing the microscopic needle of the transmitter into the horny part of the guard's palm.

"There'll be another coin for you if you succeed," Ronson said.

The guard turned and headed up the walk toward the palace, signaling for another to take his place at the

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gate while he was gone. Ronson let out a sigh of relief; the first step had been carried off perfectly. The guard had not even noticed the needle—and now he would be broadcasting any thoughts that came within a ten-yard radius of him.

Ronson leaned against the wall and switched on the receiver. Instantly he picked up the muddled gabble of the guard's thoughts: boredom, suspicion of the Netralite, desire to get off duty and spend the five-munit piece.

Above that came the words he was speaking: *Let me see Secretary Kilong, please.* Ronson detected the mind of another guard.

Then a new mind appeared: sharp, wily. This was the Overlord's private secretary, no doubt. Ronson stiffened and turned up the receiver.

At the top level of the secretary's thoughts came his spoken voice: *No, you can't arrange an appointment with the Overlord. He won't see anyone at this hour.*

Underneath that came impatience and a desire to get back to a chess game within, plus a mass of irrelevant details of the secretary's office routine.

Then came the guard's voice again: *But the Netralite says he has information about Earth.*

Suddenly a new thought leaped into the secretary's mind, a thought he couldn't suppress quickly enough: SECRET PLAN 106a: SPACE NAVY THREE OF VIRON IS INSTRUCTED TO STAGE A SURPRISE ATTACK ON EARTH AND ITS COLONIES AT 0600 EARTHTIME, MORNING OF SEP 7 3158.

And then the alarm went off.

A siren wailed loudly and the blue shimmer of a force-field clamped down about three feet from Ronson, penning in anyone who happened to be on or near the palace grounds. At the same time the mind-tapper in Ronson's pocket went abruptly dead.

Ronson knew what had happened. Thetlang D'hu probably had tracer-beams playing over the entire palace in constant search for mind-tapping devices. Ronson had been lucky; the secret information he wanted had been forthcoming before the tracer circuits discovered the mind-tap in operation and clamped down the barrier.

But now he was trapped inside the palace. The Vironian guard at the gate was

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looking at him suspiciously.

Well, the mind-tapper had served its purpose. He flicked a lever in his pocket, touching off a remote-control disintegrator that would dispose of the evidence planted in the Vironian's hand. The guard would feel a brief, painful puff of heat, but there would be no sign that he had carried the mind-tap transmitter.

With that done, Ronson turned to the other guard. "What's all the noise about?"

The guard shrugged. "Alarm. Maybe someone tried to knock off the Overlord. Happens all the time."

"But that force-field out there—you mean I can't leave the palace grounds?"

"Right. Better grin and bear it, Netralite. Once they find their man there'll be an all-clear."

"Thanks," Ronson said. He sauntered off casually a few steps, then suddenly turned and clubbed down on the back of the Vironian's neck.

The guard sagged. Ronson caught him, deftly removed the charges from his ultra-wave rifle, and propped him up against the gate. Then he turned and started to run toward the palace, while overhead the alarm-siren wailed in anger.

As he ran, he formed his plan. First, find a sub-radio set somewhere and send word to Earth of the Vironian sneak attack. Second, find some way out of the palace. Or, failing that, allow himself to be caught. *He* didn't matter too much, as long as the message got through to Earth in time.

He sprinted up the *kreth*-grass lawn and into the nearest of the big buildings that bordered the main palace building. Guards with flashlights were patrolling the grounds, and he thought he heard the sinister *chuff-chuff* of the mechanical bloodhounds as well.

The building was dark; he shoved open a door with his shoulder and stepped in. With the alarm already sounding, a little additional breakage wouldn't change the situation one bit.

In the dark he wandered through the long room he found himself in, peering around in search of a sub-radio set. Then he realized where he was. He cursed. It was the Overlord's art gallery! The last place where he'd find a way to call Earth!

And there were voices outside.

"Hey—I think there's a prowler in there!"

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"In the art gallery? A thief, maybe?"

"Who knows? The alarm went off, didn't it? Let's go in and look around."

Ronson crouched behind a fabulously rare malachite-and-gold statuette from the Andromeda system, waiting, cursing himself for a fool. He had run straight into a dead-end, and now he was caught.

There was only one chance for him. He darted across the room to a glass cabinet containing rare coins, and smashed the case with the butt of his ultragun. He slipped a double handful of coins into his tunic. Then he drew out the receiver of the mind-tapper, pressed the lever that would incinerate it, and hurled it into the darkness. It sputtered brightly for a moment, then was gone.

An instant later three burly figures burst in, and the sudden brightness of flashbeams stung Ronson's eyes.

"There he is!" one of them cried. "Down by the rare coins!"

Ronson yelled and came out of hiding; he took a few tentative running steps, then stopped. He wanted to be caught, not to be incinerated in a futile attempt at escape.

"Okay," he said. "You've got me. I was a fool to try to rob the Overlord's museum."

"Darned right you were. You'll never see Netrali again, outworlder. You'll rot on the prison moon!"

Ronson forced tears to come to his eyes. In the SSP you had to be a good actor. "Never go home again? My starving children, my poor wife . . ."

"They deserve it. You're a lousy thief. You made enough noise for ten." The Vironian drew a pocket communicator from his sash and spoke rapidly into it: "Give me the Overlord's secretary, please."

A moment later a voice said, "This is Kilong speaking."

"Secretary Kilong, we've found the source of the trouble. The alarm went off when a Netralite thief broke into the Overlord's art gallery."

"Good. I was afraid it might be much worse than that."

"What should we do with him? Bring him to you?"

"I can't be bothered. Search him thoroughly and have him dumped on the next ship bound for Demerong. I'll give the word that the alarm's over."

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"Yes, sir." Turning to Ronson the guard said, "Come along, you. We'll teach you what happens to those who try to steal from the Overlord."

Some time later that night Ronson opened his eyes to discover that he was at the spaceport of Viron City. He was dizzy and battered; they had really given him a going-over, it seemed.

But he was still alive.

His hands were tied with unbreakable plastimesh and his head felt as if it had been steamrollered. He was facing a seedy-looking Vironian in a spaceman's uniform, and one of the Overlord's guards was digging his horned claws painfully into his shoulder.

"Here's the last one for tonight, Krdryl. He won't give you much trouble. We really let him have it."

Spaceman Krdryl eyed Ronson boredly. "A Netralite, eh? What he do?"

"Tried to break into the Overlord's private museum. The idiot touched off the main alarm system and wasn't smart enough to run."

Krdryl grinned. "Well, he'll get smart on Demerong, if he wants to stay alive down there. And he'll have a whole lifetime to learn shrewdness." The captain called to a waiting spaceman. "Here—stow this one aboard. Then we blast off for Demerong."

Ronson allowed himself to be bundled roughly aboard the ship and dumped in a stinking hold. There were four or five others there already, all Vironians, all similarly bound in plastimesh. Convicts, going to the dumping ground.

There were no jails on Viron, no elaborate system of fines and sentences, and no ex-cons. There was just one punishment for all crimes on the huge world: deportation to Demerong. Murderers, thieves, prostitutes, swindlers —they all went there. And they never came back. No one was ever known to return.

Viron was the universe's largest planet, bigger even than Jupiter — a hundred thousand miles in diameter. Fortunately a fluke made it livable: it was a lightweight planet, its mass low, its gravity only slightly more than Earth's.

Such a monster world deserved a monster of a moon, and it had one in Demerong —eight thousand miles in diameter, bigger than Earth. Demerong was hell's moon, the dumping ground for the big planet's living refuse.

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And within hours Lee Ronson would be there.

He thought back over the way he had performed his assignment, as he huddled in the hold waiting to reach Demerong. It had gone well, for a while. He had the information he needed: Viron was going to pull a sneak attack on Earth six days from now, on September 7. That was what Earth Intelligence had suspected, and he had confirmed it.

If he could get word to Earth some time in the next two or three days, they would have time to deploy defenses. When the "sneak" attack came, Earth would be ready. If not—

Well, he thought, *I'm still alive. If I can only escape from Demerong and reach a subspace radio in time—*

He couldn't escape from Demerong until he got there, though. And he hadn't had any sleep in three days. He rolled over, trying to ignore the filth all around, and forced himself to accept sleep.

He was wakened by a rough hand clawing his shoulder.

"Come on, Netralite. Enough sleeping for you."

Ronson glanced up. One of the spacemen stood over him, holding a parachute harness.

"What's that for?"

"That's so you can fly, dearie. We wouldn't want you to get hurt when we dump you down the shoot."

"Aren't you going to land on Demerong?"

The Vironian shook his furry head. "No dice, buster. It's against the law for a ship to land there. We don't want there to be any chance of anyone escaping from Demerong. So we just dump the new arrivals down by parachute, and let them shift for themselves."

Ronson felt a chill cut through him. *No ship ever landed on Demerong? Then how am I going to escape?*

He'd really stuck his head in the noose this time. It would have been smarter trying to escape back on the palace grounds. He might have been killed, but at least he stood a slim chance of getting away to warn Earth of the Vironian attack. Now there was no chance. None at all.

Looking around, he saw the other new convicts were already garbed in their parachutes. There wasn't any chance of pulling anything now. Meekly he held out his shoulders and let the Viro-

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nian unseal the plastimesh and wrap the parachute around him.

"Okay, Chief. They're all 'chuted up."

"Good," came a voice from the front. "We're within dumping distance now. March 'em to the back door and heave 'em out fast."

"You heard him," the guard said. "Start moving."

"How does the parachute work?" asked a thin-voiced, pale young Vironian. "I don't know how to use one."

The guard chuckled harshly. "You better find out fast, friend. The ground is awful hard when you hit it without a 'chute."

"But—"

"That's enough talk!" The door swung open. "Out with you!"

Ronson was the third one out. He had a momentary glimpse of a sprawling jungle far beneath him, of the tops of yellow and red trees, and then he stepped out into nothingness and started to drop.

The surface of Demerong roared up to meet him. Calmly he pulled the ripcord and let himself drift down.

In six days, Earth would be attacked by these devils from Viron. And the one man who could give the warning was drifting slowly toward a prison world from which there was no escape. *Congratulations, Lieutenant Ronson,* he thought bitterly. *You've done a fine job.*

It took a long time to drop. Finally Ronson hung dangling over one of the big trees in the lush forest. Birds chattered in anger at this invasion from the skies.

There was no sign of any of the others who had dropped with him. He wondered oddly if that scared kid had managed to get his parachute open in time. It didn't matter much if he didn't; that sort of greenhorn probably could not survive on Demerong long anyway.

He dropped lightly into the tree and his harness fouled on the branches. Bracing himself carefully on an outjutting limb, Ronson freed himself of the entangled parachute and left it hanging in the tree. Ground was more than a hundred feet below. Gripping the flaky bark tightly, he began to climb downward.

Demerong was hot and sticky. He was covered with sweat before he had gone ten feet. One corner of the sky was filled with the huge sun that illuminated both Deme-

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rong and Viron. But even bigger, bulking immense and terrifying in the sky, was Viron itself, the giant planet. Demerong was sufficiently big so that sun and moon could appear in the sky at the same time.

He looked down and saw tiny figures waiting for him.

Men. Prisoners. Waiting to see the newcomer. Beneath his Netralite mask, Ronson's face itched. He wondered if it were safe to unmask here, and decided against it. Probably these convicts would have the same hatred for an Earthman that the people of Viron did. It was simpler to pose as a Netralite, a harmless native of a peaceful world.

"Here comes one of them now," someone grunted beneath him. Ronson continued to clamber downward. When he was ten feet from the ground, he let go and sprang outward, landing lightly on the spongy soil.

Four Vironians faced him. They were sullen-faced, evil-looking men, their blue skin sallow with bad living. They were carrying unsheathed knives. One of them, he saw, had an ultrawave pistol strapped to his belt. Ronson wondered how he had obtained it. His own weapon had been taken away long ago; he was totally unarmed.

"You just come down?"

Ronson nodded. "I left my 'chute in that tree. My aim wasn't so good."

One of the four Vironians squinted at him strangely, then stared at his companions. "Where's this guy from? I don't remember seeing one like this before."

"He's a Netralite," said the one with the ultragun. "Aren't you, buddy?"

"Right the first time," Ronson said. He mopped away sweat. "Damned hot here, isn't it?"

"You'll get used to it. This hotel don't take short-term guests. What you get sent up for, Netralite?"

"I tried to break into the Overlord's private museum. I wanted to steal some coins."

"Idiot! That place is wired all over."

"So I found out," Ronson said sadly. "But I'm an outworlder. I didn't know the ropes. And I needed cash."

"You won't need any cash down here," said the Vironian. "Just guts and fists, that's all. Only you better learn the ropes fast. We play a hard game down here."

"I'll stick with it," Ronson said. He wondered if he'd

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ever see Earth again, or whether he'd actually spend the rest of his life in this thug's paradise.

Suddenly one of the silent Vironians stepped forward and smashed Ronson in the mouth with the back of his hand. Blood oozed from the lips of the mask Ronson wore.

The agent reacted instantly. One fist crashed into the alien's belly; another raked the Vironian's jaw and sent him careening back into a thornbush. Ronson whirled and found himself facing the ultragun.

"Nice going," said the gun-toting Vironian.

"What the hell was that for?" Ronson demanded, looking at the man in the thornbush warily. "Why'd he hit me?"

"Just to see how you fought. You fight good, Netralite. You've got the stuff. But you better be ready to lay it on the line every second of the day. Demerong isn't any world for softies."

"I told you I'd stick with it," Ronson said. "Now you believe me?"

"Yeah. Duvron Chai will be glad to meet you."

"Who the blazes is Duvron Chai, and am I supposed to be glad to meet him?"

The Vironian's eyes narrowed. "Duvron Chai runs this place—and you damn well better be glad to meet him, if you want to go on living long."

Half an hour later they stood outside a filthy-looking shack in the middle of the filthiest collection of shacks Ronson had ever seen.

A thin-faced Vironian with a livid scar across his blue face stuck his head out a door panel.

"Yeah?"

"We want to see Duvron Chai. We brought him one of the new ones that were just dumped."

"Okay. Bring him in."

The door opened and Ronson was propelled inward. He faced someone who could only be Duvron Chai, there was no doubt of that.

He was a Vironian, taller than most—probably seven feet tall when he was standing. But he wasn't standing now. He was sprawling over a rickety throne-like chair, his hands folded over a repulsively fat belly. He wore an ultragun strapped to one fleshy thigh. Ronson wondered how these convicts had gained possession of so many weapons.

"Are you Duvron Chai?"

"I am. And speak when

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you're addressed only, Netralite."

As if signaled a waiting Vironian stepped forward and slapped Ronson in the face, reopening the wound of a half hour before. Ronson licked the blood away and said, "That's no way to treat a newcomer, Duvron Chai."

The Vironian slapped him again. This time Ronson brushed the hand away and cracked his fist into the alien's midsection. No one made a move, though Duvron Chai's hand hung poised over the ultrawave gun. Ronson squared off against his new antagonist.

The Vironian's eyes were yellow dots of hate. Ronson grinned and hit the man once, hard. He sprawled backward. The Earthman bowed to Duvron Chai.

"Nicely fought," the fat alien said approvingly. "I sure like your courage, Netralite. What's your name?"

"Thyon vor Sirwan," Ronson said smoothly.

"I like you, Thyon. Give the Netralite a knife," Duvron Chai ordered. One of the waiting Vironians handed him a weapon—homemade, crude but deadly. Ronson stuck it in his belt.

"You're now a member of my police," Duvron Chai said. "For your information, I'm the law on Demerong—such law as we have, that is. Stick with me and you'll live well. But cross me and I'll take you out to the jungle and lose you there. It won't be a quick death."

Ronson nodded. "I know a good thing when I see it. I'm your man, Duvron Chai."

During the next half hour or so the other new convicts were brought in; Duvron Chai's police force seemed very efficient about picking them up. Ronson was surprised to see the pale boy who had had parachute-troubles among them; evidently he had figured out which cord to pull before it had been too late.

Duvron Chai disposed of them all, assigning two to his police force and putting the other three to work in his labor corps. Ronson watched the fat alien with an emotion close to admiration. Duvron Chai had certainly done an efficient job of carving out an empire here on Demerong.

Ronson wondered what crime he'd been sent here for. It was certainly a major one.

After a while Duvron Chai said, "Show the Netralite where he can stay."

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Ronson was conducted to a dingy little hovel not too far from Duvron Chai's shack. Demerong was far from a palatial world, he thought, as he surveyed the roach-ridden cubicle that might be his home for the rest of his life. He decided to stick close to Duvron Chai, work his way into the fat man's confidences. As long as he was exiled here for life, Ronson thought, it might as well be a comfortable life.

But he didn't mean to give up yet. Not at all.

He ate in a slophouse across the street—food was free to members of Duvron Chai's police, he discovered. "Food" consisted of a green-colored steak cut from some nameless local beast, plus a pitcher of foul-smelling yellow beer. Ronson swilled it down and returned to his room.

The sun was sinking now, but giant Viron still hung high in the sky. Ronson glared at the planet bitterly. Viron was in shadow now, a huge reddish-purple grape blotting out a quarter of the sky. In six days—five, now—ships of Viron would rain hell on the cities of Earth.

He dug his nails into his palms. He *had* to warn them. But how? Getting the information had been simple, but relaying it to Earth was a different matter.

He drew out the knife Duvron Chai had given him, and rubbed it idly. It was strange, he thought, that Duvron Chai and a few of his lieutenants should have ultraguns. There weren't any factories on this jungle hothouse of a world, and it didn't seem likely the authorities would have permitted these men to bring weapons with them to Demerong.

Ronson's eyes brightened. There had to be a pipeline—a direct contact somewhere between Duvron Chai and the mother world! There was no other explanation for the presence of ultraguns on Demerong.

And if there were a pipeline, there was still some hope left that Ronson might get a message back to Earth.

He jammed the knife back into his belt and stood up. There *had* to be a pipeline. And he was going to find it.

It was nearly midnight before he left his room. Viron was high in the sky, monstrous, bloated. Ronson stared at the giant world with hatred.

Then he began to move through the streets.

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There was the sound of drunken singing ahead of him. Three Vironians came staggering out of an alleyway with what looked like a Vironian woman with them. They were all drunk. Ronson sidestepped them contemptuously and moved on.

He felt a hand touch his ankle and looked down. An old man lay there. By his shell-like skin Ronson recognized him as a Dartusian. He stared up at the Earthman in anguish.

"Get me a drink. You gotta get me a drink." His voice was a hoarse croak.

"Get your own," Ronson told him, and kept going.

This world was really the dregs, he thought. Death lurked in every corner, behind every tree. The outcasts of the giant world were here, the filth of all Viron.

No. Not all the filth. Some of it was still up there, scheming to attack Earth. Well, that would be taken care of if he could find some way to warn them.

He reached Duvron Chai's door and knocked gently. The thin-faced watchman popped his head through the panel.

"I want to see Duvron Chai," Ronson whispered.

"He's busy. It's late; come back tomorrow."

"No. It's important. Now! Tonight!"

"Go away, Netralite. The chief will see you in the morning."

Ronson scowled. The door was locked and probably bolted; there wasn't any way he could get in if the watchman wouldn't open up. And if he made a racket Duvron Chai himself might come to investigate. Ronson didn't want that.

The last time he'd wanted in, he'd bribed a man with a five-munit piece. But naturally they'd taken all his money before he left Viron.

Still, there were other incentives. Especially for a criminal—and Duvron Chai's watchman, like every other person on Demerong, was a criminal. He knocked again.

"I thought I told you to go away!"

"Listen," Ronson said urgently. "Listen to me, huh?"

"Go ahead."

"Before I left Viron I slipped some sticks of ryonite into my belt. The guards didn't notice it when they shipped me down here."

The watchman's eyes went bright. Ryonite was the galaxy's most desirable drug.

"I've got eight sticks," Ronson said. "I want to tell

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Duvron Chai about them. Maybe I can trade some of them in for a better place to stay."

A crafty gleam shone in the watchman's eyes. "He gave orders not to be disturbed. Why should I let you in just to make a fancy deal for yourself?"

Desperately Ronson said, "Okay, I'll give you two sticks yourself—only let me in! I can't stay in that filthy hole they gave me to live in."

"Make it three sticks."

"All right. Three. But open up."

Ronson heard the sound of a bolt sliding back and of locks clicking, and then the door edged open. The watchman appeared in the opening and said, "Hand over the sticks."

"Sure," Ronson said. In the darkness he yanked out the wedgebladed knife Duvron Chai had given him and plunged it deep into the Vironian's throat. The watchman uttered a bubbly sigh and started to fall forward in a great heap.

Ronson caught him, folded him up, and stowed him in the dark alley near the door. Then he stepped inside and quietly bolted the door. He found himself in total darkness — but somewhere up ahead he spied the yellow gleam of a light.

He tucked the knife back in his belt and began to tiptoe forward.

The yellow gleam was coming from a door slightly ajar, deeper in the building. Ronson edged close and heard a voice talking. A low, resonant, harsh voice. The voice of Duvron Chai.

"Kilong? This is Duvron."

Kilong? Ronson wondered. *Why, that was the name of the Overlord's private secretary—!*

"The shipment arrived," Duvron Chai went on. "But it wasn't enough. I still want ten more ultraguns and some decent knives. And you can throw in a couple of dozen sticks of ryonite too."

"I'm sorry, Duvron," came the reply. "I can't keep getting this stuff for you. It's risky—damned risky. You know any shipments to Demerong are strictly illegal."

"Sure I know that. And I know it's illegal for you to be the Overlord's private secretary while your brother's a convict on Demerong!"

"Duvron! You wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't I, brother? You keep coming through with the goods or I'll make use of this subradio for something

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else besides chatting with you. I'll get hold of the Overlord and tell him that his secretary is none other than the younger brother of Duvron Chai, the man who tried to assassinate him and take over Viron—"

"All right, Duvron. You win again. I'll send what you ask for."

"Thanks kindly, brother dear." Duvron Chai broke the contact—and at that moment Ronson shoved open the door and shouldered his way into the door.

The fat alien looked up in astonishment. "Thyon—what are you doing in here? How—"

Then he saw the knife flashing in Ronson's hand. He went for his ultragun and fired. A spurt of violet energy shot past Ronson's right shoulder, singed his ear, and splatted against the wall. Ronson leaped forward and grabbed the alien's wrist before he could fire again.

He twisted. The gun dropped and skittered away. Duvron Chai struggled to avert the knife, grabbing Ronson's descending arm. He was strong as a devil. Ronson drew up his knee and buried it in the fat covering Duvron Chai's stomach.

The alien grunted in pain, but succeeded in forcing Ronson's hand down. "Drop it—drop it—"

Grimly Ronson clung to the knife, while agony shot upward from his wrist through his shoulder. He clamped his teeth together as the massive alien continued the pressure. He was being forced back, back, and any minute it seemed his arm would rip loose. The pain was beyond endurance.

But Earth hung in the balance. *Earth.*

Ronson suddenly bent double and slid out from the grip of the surprised alien. Duvron Chai turned, panting heavily, and rumbled ponderously toward the dancing Earthman.

Ronson slipped lithely between his outstretched arms and stabbed the knife deep into the alien's belly. He ripped upward savagely. A torrent of blood spurted.

Duvron Chai fell backward limply. "Never should have trusted you . . . looked too damned intelligent," he muttered. "Should have killed you."

"You should never have trusted anyone," Ronson said. "You maintained your reign by blackmailing your brother. What made you think you

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could trust a stranger with a knife?"

The Earth agent stooped and deftly slit the alien's throat. There was no need to let Duvron Chai suffer. Ronson crossed the room, locked the door, and turned toward the subradio set.

Over this subradio set, Duvron Chai had extorted from his helpless brother the guns and knives and narcotics with which he'd won his empire on Demerong.

Ronson spun the dials until he picked up the secret Earth Intelligence channel.

"This is Earthly Info," a voice said. "Come in."

"Earthly Info, this is Ronson. You read me, boys?"

"Ronson! Where in blazes are you?"

"Skip that for now. Listen: Viron plans a sneak attack on Earth and her colonies at 0600 on the morning of September 7. Got that?"

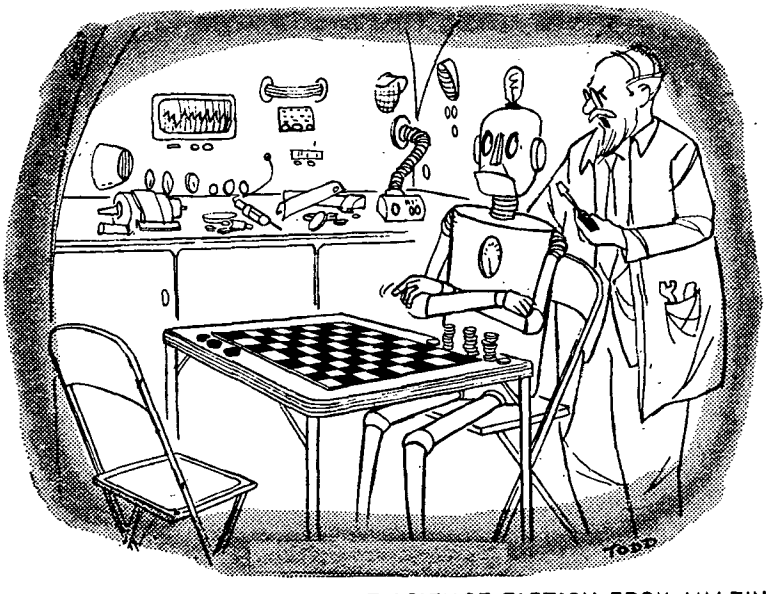
"Sneak attack, Viron, 0600 Sep 7. We'll be ready for them. Where are you now?"

"Demerong."

"Demerong? The prison world? But how—"

"Never you mind that," Ronson said. "Just get me off here in a hurry. In about a week there's going to be a war going on, friend. I want to be out there, helping Earth fight it."

THE END



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Man's inhumanity to man has been used as the theme of great literature—of fact and fiction—of history and philosophy. A broad subject indeed, to handle adequately in five thousand words. But we think you'll agree that Henry Slesar did the job in—

THE MOON CHUTE

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

THEY had thrown me into a world of darkness, a a prison more confining than the dank stone cell that was my home. I snarled like a wild animal when I heard their footsteps and felt the nearness of body heat. I strained my sightless eyes for a glimpse of their movements, so I could lash out and hurt the sneering strangers who walked into my cell. Once I caught an arm and almost tore it from the socket with the ferociousness of my blind rage. They beat me for that. They chased me around the stone cage with a thick-thonged strap, and beat me until I could feel the blood running down my body. I never begged or pleaded, not at first, but I knew it wouldn't be long before I'd join the whimpering, groveling chorus of voices I could hear from my cell.

I was in the Moon Chute, the prison of the Blind, the cold and rocky Hell created especially for me and others like me.

My name's Jugg and I'm a Reader. My mother was a Reader, and so was my father, and when I was four years old the mob came to our house, shouting and cursing and teaching me a new use for fire. I don't know why I was spared the burning. Maybe they wanted me to die a different death, a death of the soul, watching my parents scream out their last sounds on earth.

I remember some uniformed men standing around doing nothing about the horror that

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was filling the night. I found out that they were officers of the law, state troopers. They didn't have to tell me; I probed their minds with my four-year-old Reader's brain and read their responsibility there. If they had known I was Reading them, they would have been less kind. But I was only four; the branded "R" wasn't on my forehead yet. That came at the age of seven. It was the Law.

But the policemen were kind. Once the mob's errand was done, and they had made their desultory, disinterested investigation of the crime they took me to a precinct house, and I spent the night shivering on a bench. In the morning, I was taken by police vehicle to the state orphanage.

It didn't take them long to find out I was a Reader. I couldn't hide the fact; I didn't have the cunning. Because I was a ward of the state, they made an exception in my case and performed the branding process at the age of five. The branding didn't hurt, but I remember looking in the mirror at the angry red "R" in the center of my forehead, and crying until I tasted blood and salt.

I learned my lessons of hate quickly after that. I found what it meant to be endowed by a cynical Creator with the ability to read the thoughts of others. I found out how much loathing a Reader caused among normal men, how suspicion and distrust followed those who bore the red "R" on their brows. I found that a Reader must take nourishment from the hatred of the world, if he was to survive.

I reciprocated. I used my power to advantage, to escape from the orphanage. At the age of eight, I was a fugitive. At nine, I was a hardened criminal. At thirteen, I killed my first man . . .

"Who was he?"

I could almost hear the voice of the police psychiatrist again, the gentle-faced man with the foul thoughts, who had examined me just before the trial that sent me to the Moon Chute.

"Who was he?" he had said, from behind the protective one-way glass. If I couldn't see him, I couldn't Read him. Sight is essential to our talent.

"Who was he? The first man you killed?"

I answered casually. "His name was Richter, he ran a drug store on Bleeker Street. I Read him and found out he kept a cigar box full of money

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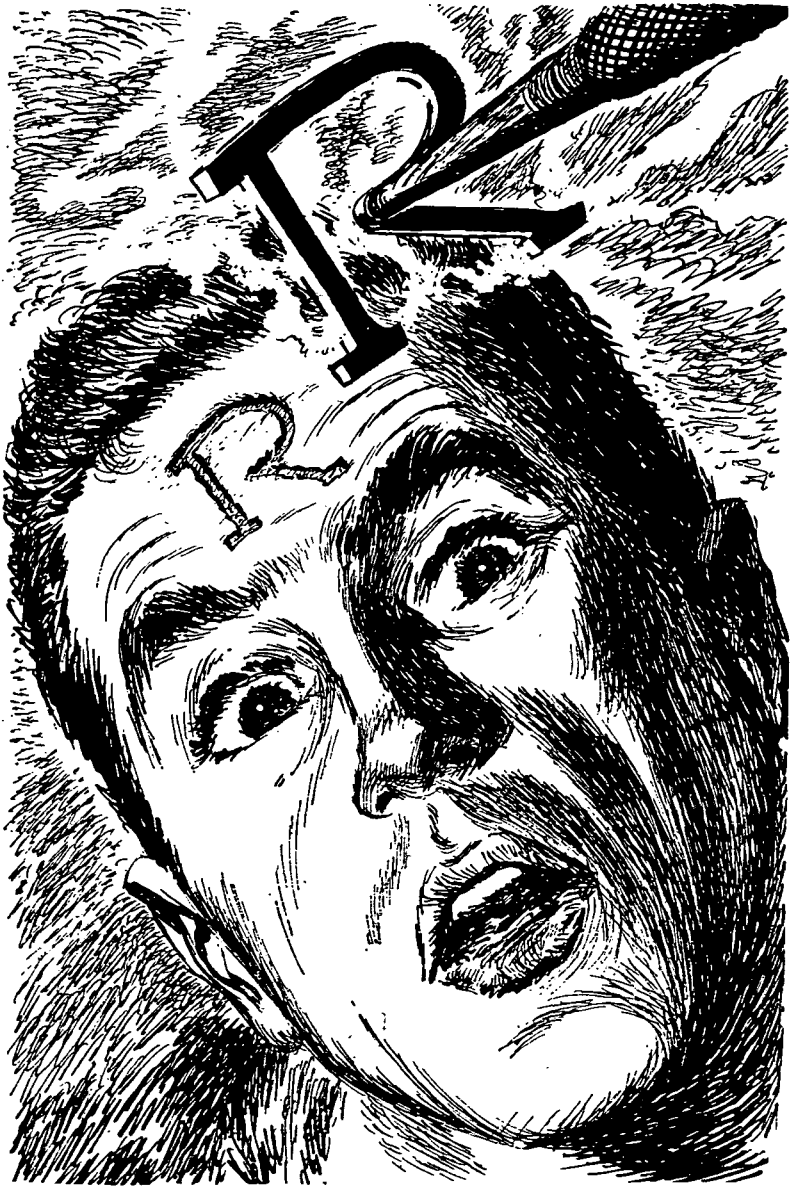

The dread brand seared his forehead—doomed him to a living hell.

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under the cash register. When he went in back, I got it. Unfortunately, he came out and grabbed my arm. I hit him with a glass jar that was on the counter. He dropped. I didn't know I had killed him until later."

"And how did you feel about it?"

"I was surprised because he had such a soft head. But he was rotten, like everybody else. I didn't care about his dying."

"Who was next?"

"I'm not sure. It was either a cop named Braff, or a man named Coster."

"And you don't have any feelings of guilt concerning these killings?"

"None!"

"Do you know the difference between right and wrong?"

"I know what's right for me and wrong for me. I know that everybody hates Readers. Why shouldn't I hate back?"

"Everybody doesn't *kill* Readers. The laws that protect Readers are the same that apply to everyone else."

"That's not the way I see it."

"You're thinking about your parents. You think that lynch mob symbolizes everyone in the world, don't you?"

I didn't answer.

"Mr. Jugg, do you know the punishment reserved for Readers who turn to crime? It's the only point of law which is different for Readers than for other people."

"Sure. You send us to the Moon Chute."

"But that's not all you know. There's a special penalty imposed upon Readers to prevent them from ever exercising their peculiar powers for the purposes of crime again. Blindness."

I curled my lip; I didn't want to show my fear.

"It's a dirty rotten trick," I said. "It's bad enough to be sent to that hell-hole, without taking away a man's sight—"

The psychiatrist sighed. "It's not a pleasant thing for the Law to do. It violates one of the essential principles of the code of justice—the principle that guards cruel or unusual punishment. But when the code was written, there weren't any Readers in the world. There had to be special provisions for handling this new-type of criminal; we found that out after Readers were escaping constantly from prisons. The only solution was to make it impossible for Readers to use their powers any longer, by imprisoning them in the most inaccessible

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and remote of prisons—and by removing the core of their power. Their sight."

I couldn't answer him.

"You know your sentence is a foregone conclusion," the psychiatrist said. "You have no defense. There are too many facts, too many witnesses—"

"I know."

"Then you can tell me the truth. Altogether, how many men have you killed?"

I thought a minute.

"Nine."

"And how old are you?"

"Twenty."

I don't remember much about the trial; I was only allowed to attend for less than three hours. They were afraid of my Reader's brain, afraid I would learn too much from the prosecution. But I still recall the summary of the state's attorney.

"This is a sacred duty," he had told the jury, his hands gripping the railing. "An unpleasant and harsh duty, but one which we cannot avoid. These men who walk among us, born through no will of their own with this strange twist in their brains, these men we call Readers are as deserving of justice and fair play as all other men. They have suffered greatly through the fear and prejudices of the ignorant; they have been hounded and persecuted for almost fifty years; they have been victimized and tormented to a point we can only label as inhumane.

"But there is another brutal fact we must face. While we can sympathize with the plight of the Readers, we must also recognize this truth. The terrible power these men have can become corrupt, can be turned to purposes of evil against which ordinary men are helpless as children. *They can read your mind.* Do you realize the significance of that? Do you realize the horror that can come from a Reader turned criminal, a Reader who feels no ethical, moral or legal responsibilities to the rest of the human race? I tell you, a Reader gone bad is the greatest enemy our world faces today.

"But *do* Readers turn bad? Is this poor man on trial today merely an unhappy sore on the fair complexion of the breed? I must say to you, *no.* In the last thirty-five years, out of an estimated Reader population of a hundred and eighty thousand almost *ninety* thousand Readers have been indicted for major crimes! Think of it! *Ninety*

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hardened criminals out of every hundred and eighty Readers. And who can say how many *more* Readers are responsible for terrible crimes — without having been caught?

"The inference is plain. The twist that turns their brains turns their souls as well. They are men robbed of the knowledge of good and evil. They are men without morals and human decency. They are criminals, thieves, murderers. Perhaps not all of them; I won't say that. But enough to have filled an entire prison—a prison they call the Moon Chute. It is there I ask this jury to send this man. It is there I ask you to have him taken, where his dreadful power will be plucked forth like an offending eye, where he will cause no more pain and terror and death . . ."

It must have been a good speech. The jury was out less than two minutes.

The last face I saw was that of Doctor Wardell.

I'll never forget that face; how could anybody? It was engraved on my brain forever, like the "R" had been engraved on my forehead.

They left me alone with him. He didn't seem to care about my being a Reader.

"My name's Wardell," he said, in a tired voice. "Look at me carefully. You'll want somebody to hate after tomorrow, and it might as well be me."

I stared at him. He was an old man, but there weren't any gray hairs on his head. All the age was in the crosspatched lines that covered his sagging face from brow to chin.

"Tomorrow?" I said." "What's tomorrow?"

"The operation," he told me gravely. "Its my duty to perform it, as I have for others. I don't want you to be afraid; I'm not the youngest surgeon in the world, but my fingers are young. It will be swift, and painless, and — successful."

"You're going to blind me."

"That's true. I'm going to destroy the optic nerves that give you sight. It won't damage you any other way, but you'll never see again."

I got sick inside.

"I've performed the operation many times. I want you to know that I am skilled." He put a hand to his forehead, as if in pain.

I tried to control the terror inside me. I decided to Read him.

I put out a gentle probe and touched the surface of his thoughts. I received a mood

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first, a mood of such sadness that I was almost brought to tears. This man hated his duty; I knew that. Then I probed deeper, and found something else in his mind. Something to do with me.

"Do you know me, Doctor?" I said.

"What?"

"Do you know me? Have you ever seen me before?"

He smiled, without losing the pained expression.

"Yes, I know you, Jugg. That doesn't make my duty any easier. Do you think you know me?"

"No," I said doubtfully. "I don't remember you."

"It was a long time ago. You were a child of perhaps five to six. I was a staff doctor attached to an orphanage near Albany, New York. Now do you remember?"

I shook my head.

"I didn't think you would. But I remember you, Jugg. You were so embittered; hard to forget." He paused. "I remember giving you your antibacterial shot. Do you recall that day?"

"No."

"You were unnaturally brave. I remember you, Jugg."

"And tomorrow—" I said.

"Tomorrow," Dr. Wardell sighed. "You must be brave again."

At nine the next morning, I was taken in bonds to the operating room of a city hospital. At ten, a dose of anesthetic obliterated all consciousness. I saw Dr. Wardell's aged, mournful features above me, and that was all.

I wasn't so brave. I was sick with fear and horror, but I knew there was no use in fighting the inevitable. I probed wildly at the brains of my captors, seeking some information that would allow me to invent a last-minute escape plan, but I found nothing in their minds but idle, personal thoughts.

When I awoke, I was in darkness . . .

I don't know if six months or a year passed before I made a friend in the Moon Chute prison.

I was taken through the darkness of space to the darkness of my cell, and I was so filled with wrath and hatred and suicidal impulses that I fought everyone and everything that came in my path. I was a blind, shrieking animal that wanted only to hurt those who had forced this fate upon me.

I spent my first few months in solitary confinement screaming my rage at the world, refusing food, wish-

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ing for the release of death. Later, I learned that my experience was the same as other Readers upon first coming to the Moon Chute. Many never survived the first few months.

But I did; and after a while, I began to feel the stirrings of instinct, the instinct that told me: "Stay alive! Nothing else matters. Stay alive!"

That was when I calmed down; and when I made a friend.

I was taken from solitary confinement and placed in a cell block which the prisoners jokingly called Blind Alley; a joke, because all prisoners were blind in the Moon Chute. A sardonic joke at that.

His name was Danny Orcutt, and he had been sent to the Moon Chute almost twelve years before. His voice sounded old, but he told me he was under forty. I enjoyed listening to the tales of his criminal adventures. He had used his power as a Reader to pull a succession of con games that had netted him close to a million dollars. He had twice undergone plastic surgery to remove the red "R" from his forehead, but it hadn't prevented his eventual capture and blinding.

One day, I said:

"What are chances, Danny? Anybody ever break out of this place?"

"Nobody, not ever," he said bitterly. "You can't do it without eyes. You can't even get started."

"How about bribery? A guy with all your loot—"

"All my loot's been confiscated, and don't think the guards don't know it. Besides, you'd have to bribe the whole damn space fleet to get out of the Moon Chute. There's no place to go but Earth, and no way to get there except by prison supply vessel."

"I have to be hopeful," I said ferociously. "Or else I go nuts."

"Sure, who am I to discourage you? But take my advice —you'd be better off playing it their way. It took me five years to find it out. At least you can get a few privileges; music, braille books, stuff like that."

I thought over what he said, and decided to try it. I became a model prisoner, and got rewarded with the trivial pleasures I'd have sneered at in my sighted, free days back on Earth. They let me go to a place called the Music Room, where we could sit around and hear recorded concerts. They let me take Braille lessons, and borrow books from the pris-

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on's Braille library. I joined a crafts class and learned to make stupid objects out of leather and beads and clay and wood. They paid us a few pennies for everything we made, and the money we earned could be used to buy cigarettes, candy, little inconsequential things that suddenly meant a lot to all of us.

I might have gone on like that for the rest of my natural life, a lump of will-less protoplasm, grateful for small favors and childish comforts, if something hadn't happened to snap me out of this goody-goody mood.

There was a guard named Holborn, a gravel - voiced, heavy-handed guy that the prisoners nicknamed Hands. He was universally hated and feared on the Moon Chute; he had all the hateful instincts of the crazed mob that had burned my parents when I was a child. I don't know how he ever got the job; the prison authorities prided themselves on the good treatment of good prisoners. The answer was simple, of course. Hands could torment the inmates to his heart's desire, and the odd code of behavior self-imposed by the prisoners protected him. They never talked.

The first day I met Hands, I found out the meaning of his nickname. I felt two sharp blows on my shoulders, and realized that a man's heavy hands were on me as I bent over the worktable in the crafts room. The fingers started to knead my flesh, painfully, and I leaped to my feet with a curse. I heard his voice for the first time, saying:

"Take it easy, buster, take it easy. I just wanted to be friendly."

"Keep your hands to yourself," I shouted. "Or—"

"Or what, blindey?" He laughed loudly, amused by defiance. "You don't know who I am, pal. I'm Holborn. I'm the new guard."

"I dont' care who the hell you are—"

I was smacked, hard, across the cheek. I flailed out with my fist and swung at the air. I heard him laugh again, and a hammer-blow struck me at the back of my neck. I fell to the floor, and he helped me up.

"Now take it easy, buster," he said. "I don't want to hurt you. This is a new assignment for me, see, and I don't want trouble. Understand?"

I didn't answer him. Later that night, in my cell, I asked Danny about him.

"Tough break for us," Dan-

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ny said darkly. "Hands was always assigned to the isolation cells. He probably got in a few licks at you when you were down there. But now he's upstairs, and that's bad."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He hates Readers," Danny said. "Even if we ain't Readers no more, Hands has still got it in for us. Best thing is to keep out of his way. If he pushes you around a little, don't say anything. It's all we can do."

I felt the fury coming on me again. But I didn't say anything to Danny. I flopped on my bunk and went to sleep.

In a few days, I knew that I couldn't follow Danny's good advice. Hands had never forgotten my first show of defiance in the crafts room, and he had picked me out as a special target of his bias. No day passed without the constant threat of his big, ham-like hands touching me; I shuffled around the prison corridors with an unabated sense of dread. Sometimes it would be nothing more than a pseudo-friendly pinch on my arm. Other times, it would be a staggering blow on the back, coming out of the darkness to startle me and make me grope frantically for the support of a railing.

I took Hands' special treatment for almost a month without complaint, but I knew my nerves couldn't hold out much longer. So I made a plan.

The first thing I did was listen. It was almost all I could do; listen and feel and try to use my remaining senses to get my revenge. I listened hard, and I listened good. I got familiar with every sound of the man. I learned to recognize his lightest footstep, his heavy breathing, his smallest, sound-creating gesture. I got so expert at it that I could recognize his approach ten feet away. For a while, my increased hearing sense enabled me to avoid contact with the guard, or at least be prepared for the onslaught of his punishing hands. But I wanted more than that.

One day, my self-education paid off.

I was in the music room, listening to a Beethoven recording, feeling the strength and power and sublimation that music could impart. I knew I was alone, that the other privileged prisoners had gone off to an audial entertainment provided by the authorities. But I wanted to hear the music; I had a hunger for music that was amounting almost to a passion.

The third movement was

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just coming to a close when I heard the sound in the room. I knew it was Hands; the familiar shuffle of his heavy feet was muffled, but I knew. He was sneaking up behind me, a smile probably playing on his face, all set to surprise me with some startling blow. But I wouldn't be surprised this time. I sat there and waited—ready.

Then his arm was sliding around my throat, in the start of a hammer-lock, the beginning of a playful game where I would be half-choked to death. But the game had new rules now, rules I had invented myself. When his sleeve touched my throat, I whirled and caught his arm in mine. The timing was perfect; he was in exactly the position I had deducted. In another second, I had him in a full-nelson, too stunned to even cry out. I held on with all the animal strength I had, feeling his muscles straining against me, taking pleasure in the pain I was causing him.

"Leggo!" he rasped finally. "Leggo, you dirty blindey—"

"Say *sir*, buster," I told him gleefully. "Show some respect for your betters—"

"Leggo or I'll kill ya! So help me, Jugg, I'll—"

"I put more pressure on the back of his neck. I didn't know what I wanted to do next; I hadn't planned any further than this one pleasureable moment. If I let him go he'd surely make good his promise; I couldn't hope for a moment of ease afterwards.

"I'll kill ya!" he shrieked again. "You blind rat! I'll break your head for ya!"

For a moment, even in my dominant position, I felt panic. There was nothing I could do now, short of ending the threat of Hands for good. It was my only course, the only action that could bring me peace from this tormentor. I applied more pressure still, until I could hear the scrape of his bones inside his flesh. I knew that I had to kill him. I put all my strength into my forearms. There was a dull crack, and Hands went limp in my arms.

I let him drop to the floor. By this time, the guard's yells had produced running feet in the corridor outside.

Hands was dead, and I was heading back to the Hell of solitary.

If anything, my ordeal in the bowels of the Moon Chute was worse the second time. I don't know how many months I lingered there, battering my worn body against the tiny confines of the stone

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cell. But I know it was long enough for me to become as whining and craven as the other victim of the hole.

Until I wanted only one thing. Death. I didn't have the courage to batter my head against the stones, but an accident brought me a means to my own end. A guard brought me my meal on a tough plastic dish that had somehow become cracked. With a little effort, I found I could break it in two. The jagged edge would serve me well.

I touched the edge to my wrist, feeling for the vein that would sever life. The dish was transparent, and it glistened like a jewel in my hand.

At first, the phenomenon of light had no effect on me. I was so imbued with thoughts of suicide that nothing else mattered. Then, slowly, the realization came. I had *seen* the dish glistening.

I held it to my eyes again, but saw nothing. I almost decided that it was a trick of my brain, a delusion granted to me just before death. Then, on lowering the dish to the ground, I saw light flash again—a tiny pinpoint, true—but it might well have been the corona of the sun.

Hope filled my whole body. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. Would I be able to know light again? I didn't think of actually *seeing*—there was no hope in me for that. But just to know *light!*

I stared at the dish until my head throbbed, staring at the faint glister. Then I roved over the cell, seeking for other pinpoints of light. I found nothing.

I stared and stared at the dish, until I fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes again, my sight had returned. Not just light. Everything. The dish, the dank cell, the barred window of my cell, my own hands and feet and body —everything.

I could see again. I didn't know how or why. But I could see.

The first thing my sighted eyes did was cry.

It was the most difficult chore of my life, fighting the urge to scream my discovery to the world. But I fought it. I knew I *had* to fight it, or I would lose the precious thing which had been willed to me again. If the authorities knew I had the powers of a Reader once more, they would rectify the error quickly. It had to be a secret—my own secret!

Later that day (or was it night?) the guard came into my cell to refill the water pitcher. He was a stout,

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phlegmatic man, far different from the man I had imagined in my blinded brain. I sat in a corner of the cell, staring straight ahead, giving no indication of my new-found sight. But I was probing into his brain, gingerly, anxiously, seeking for information that would help me. There was nothing, nothing but loathsome thoughts of physical and carnal hunger in the man's cesspool of a mind. I decided to prompt him.

"I heard a ship," I said.

He whirled. It was the first time I had spoken to him in anything but angry tones.

"What ship?" he said gruffly. "You ain't heard no ship today. You musta been dreaming."

"No, I could have sworn I heard a ship. I heard the rockets blasting for landing."

"You're nuts," he said contemptuously.

I reached back into his mind, probing for an effect of my words upon his thoughts. I Read disconnected impressions, concerning the prison supply ship that shuttled back and forth between Earth and the Moon Chute, impressions about the articles of comfort and pleasure it would bring, impressions about new prisoners. I had to find a more definite answer.

"When does it arrive?" I said. "The next supply ship?"

He laughed. "What the hell's the difference? You ain't booked passage."

I probed sharply into his brain.

Lunar 9, he was thinking. *Lunar 9.*

The ninth day of the Lunar month. I had my answer!

"What's the date?" I said, as he started to leave. "What's the date today?"

"Say, you're full of questions, ain't you?" He chuckled. "I wouldn't worry about dates, pal. You ain't making any appointments."

I probed, and Read my answer.

Lunar 4. Lunar 4.

He slammed the great cell door shut, leaving me to a darkness even my new-found eyes couldn't dispell. But it wasn't the same; it didn't fill me with the accustomed horror. I knew that sight was mine, and that my powers had been restored.

And I knew that a ship would be here in five days. Five days to plan my escape!

I picked up the broken plastic dish, and started to scratch a rude calendar on the stone wall.

I was awake all through my normal sleeping hours.

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carefully working out the plan.

In the morning, when the first meal was brought to me, I put it into action. Calmly, I told the phlegmatic-faced guard that I had important information to impart to the Moon Chute warden. He merely sneered at first, but I kept probing his mind until I found the deep and intricate sources of his doubts and fears. I used my findings well. I told him that I had information concerning a prison-break, and that if he failed to allow me to report them to the warden, he would be held responsible.

He continued to scoff at my request, but later in the day, he returned to my cell with the head guard of the isolation cells behind him.

"All right, Jugg," his superior said roughly. "What's all this about a break?"

"I'll only talk to the warden," I said defiantly. "But you better let me see him, or there'll be trouble."

They exchanged worried looks. Could they take the chance of ignoring me?

I had figured them right.

"All right," the head guard said. "On your feet."

I allowed them to lead me out of the cell and down the corridors. The prison's bowels were as dank and dreary in actuality as my blinded brain had imagined them.

The Warden's office was a comfortable large room, lined with oak paneling. The Warden himself was a gruff, bald-headed man with sharp features and a worried frown. He let them seat me in a chair next to his desk, and I stared distantly over the top of his head while I spoke.

I don't know exactly what I told him. It made little sense. But I was more concerned in what the Warden's brain was telling me. As I rambled on about overhearing a fictitious conversation involving a prison break, his mind was working. I learned that my guard had been correct, that a supply vessel was due to land on Lunar 9, and scheduled to depart the same day. I learned the name of the ship's pilot, the number of the ship's crew, the details concerning the supplies he was bringing to the prison. I learned an amazing book of facts concerning the trip, and I knew that I could use these facts to advantage.

When my tale had been told, the Warden's lip curled and he said:

"This man is unbalanced. Take him back to isolation."

"Wait a minute—" I protested.

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But the guards were already yanking me from the chair, and dragging me out of the panelled office to the corridors. I didn't care; I had learned what I wanted to know.

Each day I scratched off a period of hours on my wall calendar, and each day I polished my plan for escape.

On the ninth day of the lunar month, I heard the muffled roar of a descending rocket ship, and knew that the moment had come.

When my guard came in, bearing the midday meal, I waited until his back was turned.

Then I threw myself upon him, covering any outcry he could make with one hand, while my other whipped his arm behind his back. I could hear his muffled gasp of surprise; then I slammed the hard edge of my palm across his neck. I didn't know if the blow killed him, but he lost consciousness and dropped to the stone floor.

Swiftly, I made the exchange of clothing. It was a bad fit; he was too short and stout; but it would have to do.

I dragged his body, now in prisoner's uniform, to my bunk. I draped a blanket across him, and left the cell.

The corridor that led to the head guard's quarters, adjacent to the elevator that would take me to the upper section of the Moon Chute, was long and circuitous.

I rapped boldly on the head guard's door, and pushed it open.

He was sitting at a desk, huddled over a report sheet. There was a pistol in the holster draped over the back of the chair.

"What is it?" he said in annoyance, and turned around.

It was easy to beat him to possession of the weapon. I held the pistol in an unwavering grip, the muzzle hard against the third button of his uniform. I said:

"The elevator. How does it work?"

"You can see!" he stared at me, stared at the red "R" on my forehead, now glowing with the feverish intensity of my design.

"I can see," I snarled. "And I can Read, too. So don't waste my time, jailer. How does the elevator work?"

"It doesn't," he said, his voice trembling. "You have to contact the guard on the second level. He's the only one that can set the mechanism—"

I probed his mind, and found he was speaking the truth.

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"All right," I snapped. "Call the second level and tell them to start it up. And watch what you say, jailer; I wouldn't hesitate to use this gun. You don't have to read my mind to know that."

He looked in my eyes and knew I meant it. Then he used a desk intercom to contact the upper level of the Moon Chute.

"One more thing," I said with a smile, measuring his taller, slimmer body with my eyes. "The uniform."

It was a far better fit.

"Goodbye, jailer," I said, and turned the gun in my hand. It was a good feeling, bringing the solid butt down on his head. There was blood matting his hair when I left the office.

I stepped off the elevator on the second level and went briskly towards the first guard on the floor. He watched my approach curiously.

I smiled and came up to his side. He said: "Who are you?"

"A friend," I answered, drawing the pistol from the holster. "But an enemy if you don't do what I say. One word and I will kill you."

His eyes widened with fear and surprise.

"I want you to take me to the airlock. To the supply ship that just came in."

He was staring at the "R" on my forehead.

"That's right," I laughed softly. "I can Read you, friend. I can Read every thought in that head of yours. So don't try any tricks. Just lead me to the airlock, and you'll be all right."

The rest was easy; astonishingly easy. The precautions against break-out in the Moon Chute were few; they had banked too much on the blind eyes of the prisoners; they had thought Darkness was their best protection. I pulled the guard's cap well over my brow as we entered the airlock that led to the supply ship. The pilot and two crew-members, awaiting their orders from the Warden, weren't surprised when we entered the vessel. But a moment later, they were surprised. I lifted the pistol to belt-level, and told them what they had to do. They didn't argue.

Fifteen minutes later, the supply ship fired rockets, and we were heading back to Earth.

I kept probing the brains of my captives, making certain there would be no betrayal. I felt exhilarated, excited, hopeful of the future for the first time in over two years.

There was one more step

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that had to be taken to make my mission successful. By this time, news of my escape would have been radioed to Earth, and there would be a welcoming committee on the lookout for the arrival of the moon vessel. But I knew a way to foil that procedure, too.

We were only three hours from Earth's orbital pull, when I did what I had to do.

I readied the moon ship's emergency escape-sled, and fired the pistol at the ship's reactor control. The crew shrieked in horror and fear at what I had done, and made a rush towards me. I fired and wounded one of them, and the others backed away.

Then I crawled into the space-sled, and pulled the firing mechanism.

I was six thousand miles away from the supply ship when it blew up. But I was safe, and heading back for Earth.

I spent three months in Venezuela, a month in St. Thomas, three weeks in Mexico City. It was easy for me to put a bankroll together; I had plenty of experience.

I couldn't get the horror of the past two years out of my mind, but there was one aspect of the nightmare that still worried and puzzled me.

I had to find the answer, and only one man could supply it.

I went to see him.

He didn't recognize me when I called at his office, a felt hat pushed down over my brow, a coat collar covering half my face.

"Hello, doctor," I said.

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"Jugg's the name." I took the pistol from my pocket, but didn't point it at the old man: it was strictly a precaution. Then I lifted off my hat.

He stared at me wordlessly for a while. Then, his voice a harsh whisper, he said:

"Jugg. I had heard of your escape. I was—glad."

I laughed.

"You don't believe," Wardell said mournfully. "And yet—you can always learn the truth. My mind is open to you, Jugg."

I accepted the invitation, and probed.

He was telling the truth. He was glad.

"What happened to me?" I said. "I was blind for almost two years, and then I wasn't blind. What happened to me, doctor?"

He didn't answer me, not with words. But I kept the probe searching his brain, and I knew.

Wardell hadn't performed

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the operation as scheduled. Instead of destroying the optic nerves that would have taken away my sight, he had merely paralyzed them. In two years, the paralysis had disappeared, and normal vision had returned.

But it hadn't been a surgical error. It had been deliberate.

"But why?" I said, looking baffled. "Why did you do it?"

"I don't know." He bowed his head wearily. "I had many opportunities to do the same before. But somehow, the sight of you, Jugg, the sight of the boy I knew as a child—a brave, bitter child — I couldn't take away your sight."

He said nothing more, but I continued to probe.

"There's more to it than that," I said. "I can see it in your mind, doctor. There's something else."

"No, nothing else—"

"There is! I can Read it, doctor. I can read—*Guilt.*"

He looked up, his eyes startled.

"No! Nothing else!"

"Tell me about it, Doctor Wardell. I can Read for myself, you know. Tell me about it."

He shut his eyes, as if the action would block my probing brain. Then he opened them again, and said:

"All right, Jugg. I'll tell you."

He walked to the window, and didn't face me as he spoke.

"It started some twenty years ago," he said, in a flat, lifeless voice. "During the height of the Reader persecutions. There were high-level government meetings held constantly, trying to decide what formal action should be taken. There was much debate over the issue, the most important issue facing mankind at the moment.

"The problem was simple. The Readers were a threat to the human race, a threat to all those who had normal mental powers. The hate that engulfed the Readers was shared by the governments of Earth, and yet they couldn't express that hate without criticism. They, too, wanted the Readers destroyed—but they had no legal or morally acceptable ideas as to how that destruction could be accomplished.

"And then the Idea was born. What if the Readers were criminals? What if they were enemies of society? What if they committed heinous crimes? Surely, then, society would be justified in tracking them down and removing the source of their power. It was

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a great and simple Idea. The Readers had to become Criminals—so that the world would have *reason* for their hate and fear—reason to blind and imprison them where they could move among normal men no longer.

"And that was the Plan, a Plan officially instituted almost twenty years ago."

I stared at him.

"What are you talking about? How could they make criminals out of the Readers?"

"It wasn't difficult, once the goal had been set. There is a certain chemical compound, a formulation which acts in deadly fashion upon certain tissues in the brain. Once injected into the blood stream, this compound does its evil work upon the consciousness, impairing the functions of the brain, those factors which allow men to decide the difference between right and wrong. It destroys the very core of conscience. It permits a man to commit violence and unholy deeds without the pangs of doubt and fear. It makes men into animals, caring nothing for the pain or death of others. It obliterates mercy."

I sat down.

"It's a terrible thing," Dr. Wardell said. "And I was a party to it. I was one of the medical men who worked with the government on the project, and it was partly my own work in the anti-bacterial field which permitted the Plan to succeed. It was I who suggested that the chemical compound could be incorporated easily into the anti-bacterial injections given every infant and child—the injections which are supposed to protect against disease germs. Through my work, these injections became something else to the Readers—they became the poison which rotted their minds, turned them into monsters."

He looked around, and his eyes met mine.

"I made you what you are, Jugg. You are my creation. Your crimes, your murders are on my soul."

"We have to stop it," I said.

"It's too late . . ."

"NO! For this generation, perhaps. But not for the next."

"I'm tired," Wardell said. "I'm an old man."

"'But I'm not. I'll tell them, Doctor. If I have to spend the rest of my life doing it—"

He came up to me, and put his veined hand on my shoulder. His voice was fervent.

"Yes!" he said. "Tell them, Jugg! Tell them all! Stop this horror before it's too late!"

"I will," I promised.

And I will. I will. I will!

THE END

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SIN PLANET

By MACK REYNOLDS

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

A friend of ours, Bill Hamling, edits a magazine called Rogue. *This somewhat irreverent book has been called The Poor Man's Esquire and Mack Reynolds roams the world as its correspondent, reporting back as to what interesting varieties of sin are favored in various world-cities. Recently, he took the wrong plane and landed on Ennui, an out-of-the-way planet* Rogue *wasn't interested in. But* AMAZING STORIES *was, so herewith is a report of sin on Ennui. Heavens to Betsy, what a place!*

WHEN the spaceport reefer units had cooled ship and tarmac the ladder snaked out, the sole passenger destined for this stop worked his way down, a single bag in his hand. He strode with moderate haste to the nearest shield and stood looking back at the craft that had been home for some weeks. Auto-longshores on their whirling treads scampered about and in a matter of moments the ship had deposited cargo, took on cargo, and then began again its fulminations against gravity, finally shaking the tentacles of inertia from its should-have-been immovable bulk.

It disappeared into the nothingness above and Jeff Archer made with a shrug which was at the same time a stretching of muscles and picked up his bag. The *Sirian Clipper* had been roomy enough, her air being somewhat superior to nature's own, but there was still a feeling of constriction gone.

There was no welcoming committee. In fact, there was no one at all other than the technician in the control tower who gave him a wave as Jeff passed on his way to the administration building. He had not expected a "steamboat round the bend" reception but there were usually a few sightseers about when a Clipper landed.

The glass portals of the administration building opened before him, closed behind him. On the far side of the expanse of tile was a mildly gaudy TE sign blinking its letters in

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It was late. The boys had to hurry.

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rainbow neon. Archer made his way in that direction.

Inside, the door having closed quietly after him, he put down the bag and looked over the counter.

"Hey," he said, without either volume or impatience. He had a whole week to kill.

The other wore the standard Terran Express uniform down to the faint whiff of *Wanderlust* perfume. But right now his eyes were closed and his stockinged feet tucked into a drawer of the desk.

He growled softly, opened his left eye, closed it and began to mutter something. He shot open both eyes, his chin dropped and he caught himself before his chair took him over backward.

"Holy smokes, a *tourist!*"

He scrambled erect, his face shining welcome. He sat down again, his face still shining welcome and began slipping into his shoes whilst demanding, "Where in the hell did you come . . . ?" He caught that and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I received no advance notice of your arrival."

Jeff leaned on the counter. "I didn't know until yesterday I'd stop. Got a spacegram from the home office. Had some time to kill anyway, might as well do it here."

"You don't kill time on Ennui," the other muttered, finishing with his shoes. "It dies a slow death of age here." He held out a hand to be shaken. "I'm Freddi Braun, Ennui agent of Terra Express."

"Jefferson Archer, just Jeff," Jeff said. "I suppose you can make reservations for me?"

"All the standard TE services, including an auto-hotel right here in the building."

"I doubt if I'll be staying in this town. I'm not exactly a tourist. We might as well get this straight, I'm looking for the local sin-city."

The tourist agent blinked three times.

"Sin-city, *sin-city,*" Jeff said. "I'm from Interplanetary Mag Writers. Classified Hack Fourth Class, Division X. That's men's magazines. My sub-classification is sin-cities."

Freddi asked cautiously, "What's a sin-city?"

Jeff Archer sometimes got impatient at this point. His father and grandfather had both ranked Third Class, Sports. He'd never made that grade. He said, "You know. Wine, women, and song, wide-open town, narcotics, political corruption, vice of all sorts. Every planet has at least one sin-city. Jerks back on Earth

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with soft jobs in department stores and such sit around in the evenings and read my articles and drool."

The other was shaking his head. He'd started shaking it almost from the beginning of the description. By its end he was shaking it *regretfully.* "Not on Ennui," he said. "There is no sin-city on Ennui."

Archer said, "That's what you think. If there isn't one I stretch a point here and there and *make* one. Come on, let's go get a cup of coffee and talk about it. You don't look pushed with business."

The tourist agent ducked under the counter to join him, muttering, nostalgia in his voice, *"Coffee!* I remember."

He led the way out a back door of the spaceport building after showing Archer a place to stow his bag. He calmed the other's hesitation with, "There hasn't been even a petty crime on Ennui for five years, not to speak of anything as exciting as pilferage."

The street was on the drab side, across it a small bar and grill, not different from every bar and grill across from every spaceport, airport, train or bus station down through the ages.

The place was empty except for the bartender who wore the white apron uniform of the IT monopoly including a faintest touch of *Prost!* perfume. "Hi, Freddi," he said, eyeing Archer with unfeigned interest. "Shucks, if I'd known anybody was going to be on the Clipper I'd been there to meet it."

Freddi made introductions before choosing a table. "Jeff Archer, meet Jack Casey. Couple of concentrates," he ordered. "Hot or cold, Mr. Archer?"

"Jeff," Jeff said. "Concentrate! You mean that sour-lemonade stuff? Coffee for me."

"Yeah," Freddi said. He and the bartender sighed, the sweetness of nostalgia again in the air. "Jeff, this is a D-Classification planet and one ounce of dehydrated coffee will make fifteen cups while one ounce of concentrate makes a thousand."

Archer screwed up his face. There were a dozen questions to ask already, but some of them could wait. He said, while the bartender was drawing the water, "What's the spaceport doing way out here? Usually it's on the edge of the capital city."

"Ennui *is* the capital city," Freddi told him.

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"Oh. Well, where's the population center? Where are the big resorts?"

Casey was bringing their drinks. He said sadly, "This *is the* population center." Suddenly his eyes went to the clock. "Jumpinjets, Freddi, this stranger coming along made me forget. It's almost ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock?" the tourist agent said blankly.

"It's the first Friday in June." The bartender was scrambling back to his post, hurrying small glasses onto the bar.

"Holy smokes," Freddi gasped. "Come on, Jeff!" He scampered to his feet.

Men began pouring into the tiny bar. Fifteen or twenty of them, Jeff Archer estimated. They lined up impatiently, each behind one of the glasses. Freddi Braun made hurried introductions. "Boys, this is Jeff Archer. Hack writer going to do some articles about Ennui."

Some of them hurried some kind of a hello, but most of them muttered, their hand held within an inch or so of their respective half-sized shot glasses.

"What'll it be this time, gents?" Casey said, his voice tense.

"*Woji,*" they chorused, evidently having decided upon that answer beforehand.

Jeff Archer wasn't sure he wanted any of the fiery Martian absinthe this early in the day but he held his peace. All this probably came under the head of local color and he might be able to use it. Local color a writer needed, even for sin-city pieces.

The clock chimed and the bartender began pouring as fast as he could go down the line. As quickly as a glass was filled it was downed, without chaser, and the glass replaced until Casey came by again. He had it down, Archer had to admit, to a fine, fast art. Jeff had never seen a man pour so rapidly and accurately in his life. Not a drop spilled, not a motion wasted. He tore up and down past the eighteen or twenty glasses filling them almost as rapidly as they were polished off.

Jeff Archer murmured, "What the hell," under his breath and drank along with the rest. He'd never seen such bolting of liquid dynamite in his life. But he could find out just what was happening later.

The clock chimed again, Casey stopped his pouring, everybody relaxed. One of the newcomers said happily, "By

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golly, I got four this time. That's the best I ever did."

Another said, a hint of the *woji* blurring his voice, "Casey is getting faster."

Casey said modestly, "I been practicing with a bottle of water. You boys can depend on Interplanetary Taverns giving you the best service possible."

Now that the tension was over the men crowded around the planet's most recent addition, all of them with a few words to say before making their apologies and heading back for their jobs.

When they had gone Jeff Archer and the tourist agent took their table again. Archer cleared his throat and said, "What just happened?"

Freddi was pleased with himself having got three *wojis* of his own and a fourth that Archer had donated to him. Jeff Archer didn't like to drink fast, not *that* fast.

Freddi said, "I told you Ennui was D-Classification. In fact, it's D-Clasification . . ."

Jeff muttered, "I didn't know you could get below 'C'."

"Sub-division Four. Practically no freighters stop off here and even when they do merchants aren't interested in shipments involving such small orders."

"But what happened just then?" Archer insisted.

"Don't you get it? There's no prohibition on Ennui but we have such shortages that our liquor regulations have to be, well, stringent."

"Stringent?"

Casey took over the explanation as he washed the glasses. "On the first Friday of each month, starting at ten o'clock, for two full minutes, you're allowed to buy alcoholic drinks on Ennui. There are some other qualifications, too. It's for sale only over this bar and no glass can hold more than one-third of an ounce."

Jeff Archer was taken aback. "We can't buy a drink for the rest of the month? You can't be serious?"

That was right.

"Well, then, why weren't there more men here? I'd think the whole population of the planet would . . ."

"It was," Freddi said. "Except for two or three who don't drink."

Archer relaxed in his chair, slumped would be the better word. "Let me get this. You mean there are less than thirty men on this planet?"

"Twenty-three, including you," Freddi said.

"But look . . ." He had a hundred questions. Finally settled for, "What are you do-

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ing here?" He looked at Casey. "And *you?*"

That was easy. Freddi said, "If Terran Express wants to keep its interplanetary monopoly franchise it's got to have an office and representative on every populated planet." He nodded at Casey. "And the same applies to Interplanetary Taverns. They've got to have a properly staffed bar on every planet or they lose *their* franchise."

Indignation was beginning to well in the writer. "But the guide book said this planet was the richest gem center in the galaxy. Just in rubies alone . . ."

Freddi said gently, "It's been a long time since mining was done with pick and shovel, Jeff. Here we've got automation raised to its zenith. People are just not necessary."

Archer felt desperate. He turned to Casey. "But look, this law about liquor only two minutes a month. Who's to stop you serving it, well, say, three minutes?"

There was a reserved dignity in the bartender's answer. "See here, Archer, we got *laws* on Ennui."

The writer was holding his hands out, palms upward. "Sure, but, well, who *enforces* them. It seems to me that you fellows could . . ."

A metallic voice cut in with a warning, a voice that seemingly came from the walls. "Subversive discussion is a misdemeanor. Article 4, Section B. Ennui criminal code. This is a first warning. Repetition involves prosecution."

Casey said, "We got automation like it's never been no place else."

Jeff Archer suddenly felt the need for fresh air. "Come on," he said to Freddi Braun. "Let's get out of here." Followed by the tourist guide he made for the street.

"See you gents later," Casey said in the tone of his calling.

They strolled up the street, the tourist agent pointing out the town's sights with a professional line of chatter. "And here to our left," he was saying happily, "we have the sapphire plant. Once a month a human mechanic checks the non-human mechanics, otherwise it is fully automatic." He broke off to look shyly at the other and to say, "You know, this is the first time I've ever had the opportunity to give a bona-fide tourist the conducted tour of Ennui."

"I'm not a tourist," Archer growled, and then with all but anguish in his voice. "Look here, Braun, you're young and

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you look fairly smart. Why don't you *leave?"*

Freddi Braun looked at him, taken aback. "I work for TE," he said. "I've got seven years in with them. If I quit, they would be wasted. My career . . ."

"Then Casey," Archer insisted, "and all those other men . . ."

"In the same boat. They've had the hard luck of being assigned to Ennui for a few years. If they flunk out they lose seniority or possibly even their jobs." He hesitated before an auto-dispenser, put a coin in it. A cigarette rolled out.

Archer said, "You buy your cigarettes one at a time, Freddi? Lots of trouble, isn't it?"

Freddi chuckled bitterly, brought a small pair of scissors from his pocket, cut the cigarette into four pieces, then carefully stashed three of them away in a miniature cigarette case. The fourth piece he inserted in a clever holder which obviously allowed the smoker to consume butt and all.

"My weekly allotment," he said, lighting up. "Lady nicotine is on the scarce side, too, but . . ." In the middle of his sentence he stopped short, a worshipful expression spread over his face and he grabbed the neat TE cap from his head.

Archer stopped, too, aghast.

Walking toward them from down the street was a gangling female, colorless of face, tight of mouth. Her clothes . . . but Jeff Archer decided to ignore her clothes. Either they were impossible to obtain on Ennui or she had the worst taste he had ever heard about.

As she passed, without a nod, Freddi said huskily, "Hi, Goldie." For a long moment he looked after her until she disappeared into the doorway of the street's most elaborate bungalow.

Archer said, "Holy cow, what was that?"

"That was Goldie."

"So I gathered. Who's Goldie?"

"Ennui's womenfolks."

Archer turned again and looked down the street in the direction in which she had disappeared. "Are you kidding?"

The tourist guide in Braun reasserted itself. "Goldie was a stowaway. The first and only woman ever to set foot on Ennui. I suppose she owns half the planet."

"Half the planet!"

The other sighed deeply. "Among other things, Goldie

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charges twenty credits a word to talk to a man."

"Did - you - say - twenty - credits-a-word?"

"That's right," Freddi sighed. "Another two weeks and I'll have enough to . . ."

"That old-bag . . . ?"

Braun drew himself up stiffly. "See here, sir. You might be a TE customer but you're speaking about the woman I love."

"Love!"

"Me and everybody else on Ennui," Braun said. "She's the only woman on the planet remember."

"But, well, how did she get half the property on . . ."

"Oh, that. For a while Goldie worked in Casey's Bar. Made enough on tips in the first week to start her investments. Pay's high on Ennui, you know—for obvious reasons—and nothing to spend it on." He sighed again. "Mostly we spend it on Goldie."

They'd reached the end of the street, now they started back. At the spaceport administration building Braun helped the other with his bag, conducted him to the Presidential Suite of the auto-hotel.

The writer had been quiet for a long time. Now he turned to his companion. "You characters must be crazy, letting yourselves be marooned on this nut-house planet. Believe me when that Clipper sets down next week I'm going to be out on the tarmac waiting for it."

"Next week?" Braun said blankly. "You mean next year."

"Now I know you're around the bend! My firm sent me here for one week and that'll be plenty!"

Freddi attempted consolation. "Sorry, Jeff, somebody goofed-it for you. The spaceship comes just once a year. That's one reason for all the shortages."

The writer was suddenly weak. "A year!"

"That's right. But look," the tourist agent told him soothingly, "it's not as bad as all that—not for you. Look at me. I'm a tourist agent with no tourists. Casey is a bartender without liquor to sell. At least you're a writer. This planet is a natural. It's practically one big gem. What a story! And some of the animal life is amazing."

"I'm a Division X," Archer snapped. "Not a damned Division K, zoölogist."

Freddi shrugged it away, looked at his watch. "Well, I suppose you'll want to unpack. I'll see you later at the mess hall. We all eat at the commu-

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nity house." He grimaced, "Class D, hydroponics and concentrates."

After he'd left Jeff Archer scowled. "Animal life, gems! What's the guy trying to do, get me to louse up my union standing writing out of my classification?"

He opened his suitcase, dug around for a moment finally coming up with an Electronityper. He growled under his breath, "Might as well get the first story off. If I'm going to be here a year I'll have to take the place from every angle if I'm ever going to make my article a month quota."

He sat himself down in a pneumato-chair and began dictating into the typewriter.

"Title," he said, *"Ennui, Sin-Planet Supreme,* space, *by,* space, *Jefferson Archer,* space, paragraph.

"Sin-racked city in its cesspool section of space is tiny Ennui, happily largely unknown to the average reader of this magazine. Happily, we say, since the degree of iniquity here is all but unbelievable. Paragraph.

"For instance, fiery woji *is openly sold in Casey's Bar right on the principal street of the principal city. And so depraved are the employees of the gigantic gem plants that they leave their posts en masse even at ten o'clock in the morning in order to indulge in glass after glass of the potent beverage.* Paragraph.

"A certain narcotic, which I shall leave unnamed, is available in slot machines on city streets of Ennui, nor were we surprised, strolling along at mid-day to spot a painted woman. . . .

THE END

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They made him play God... but it was up to him to decide if he would be a God of Destruction, and hurl the atomic thunderbolt . . .

UNTO THE Nth GENERATION

By ROG PHILLIPS

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

THE nurse came in, pushing the breakfast cart ahead of her. Her hair was blonde, her complexion flawless and fairly radiating the pinkness of good health. Her uniform, made of one of the inorganic plastics, was spotless white.

"Good morning, Greatgrandpa John," she said cheerfully. "How are you today." It was not a question. It was a ritual she had been carefully trained in.

"Eh?" John said. He watched her come toward the bed. "You're a new one," he said. His eyes took on a sly look. "Purty, too. What's your name?"

"Ada." She began transfering the dishes to the bed stand.

"Ada what?"

"Ada Blake." She smiled affectionately and unfolded the napkin to spread under his chin.

"Blake?" he echoed, frowning. "Say, maybe you aren't a great-granddaughter of mine ay tall. What was your mother's maiden name?"

"Ada White." The nurse dipped a spoon into the synthetic cereal and brought it towards John's mouth.

He pushed it away and scooted himself up to a sitting position. "I can feed myself," he said curtly.

Smiling, she relinquished the spoon.

"White?" he said. "Your

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mother's name was White. That don't help. Blake and White." He chewed thoughtfully. "What were your grandmothers' maiden names?"

Ada's face dimpled in a smile. "Joan Winstead, and ——" She touched the tip of a finger to her chin and gazed ceilingward while John watched her with impatience. "And Shirl Daven-"

"Shirl Davenport!" John said. "That's the one. Daughter of mine." He looked at the nurse with a twinkle in his eyes. "So you're a greatgranddaughter of mine. Thought so. What did you say your name was again?"

"Ada. Ada Blake."

"Ada." John said the name as though sampling its flavor. Then he nodded his head in approval.

Ada waited. Every morning the ritual was exactly the same, down to the last intonation, the lengths of the individual pauses in conversation—even to the way Greatgrandpa John got cereal on his chin with the third spoonful.

"Guess all of your generation are greatgrandchildren of mine," John said absently.

"Yes, Greatgrandpa John," Ada said, softly, reverently.

Then she smiled, and her smile was a mask for her inner feelings. It took tremendous will power to keep to the ritual at this point, rather than follow her own natural impulses and drop to her knees in worship.

No words could ever describe the simple wonder of being in Greatgrandpa John's presence, of seeing Him portray fresh surprise, curiosity, pride, and other mortal traits, always the same way, each day, in his simple lesson of living, just as though he were not the Captain . . .

"Yup," Greatgrandpa John said quietly. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then frowned at a recollection.

He was going to have to kill all of them. He mustn't forget that! Somehow, some way, he was going to have to kill them all, down to the last great great grandchild.

He had made up his mind about it last night.

The logic of it, the necessity of it, had hit him with numbing clarity, followed by a wave of anger toward the whole human race for not having seen something so obvious and so inevitable and taken steps to avoid it —avoid all *this*.

Some things are obvious to everyone. If you take a loaded gun and point it at someone and pull the trigger you will kill or wound him. If you are a good shot and you take careful aim the outcome is certain.

In the same way, with the same inevitability, a lot of human situations that can happen out among the stars are just as predictably fatal. And what *can* happen *will* happen sooner or later, unless steps are taken to avoid it.

It would have been so simple for the human race to have thought of that before going out

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into space, for it to have explored the hypothetical situations for their potential dangers, and to have thought out ahead of time what should be done and condensed it all into a book that would be required reading for anyone going into space.

If there had been such a book, John Davenport reflected grimly, then when the *Polaris Explorer* crashed, he and the others would all have known that the one thing they must NOT do was have children, start a colony cut off from the rest of humanity. Not without seeds from which to grow vegetation. Not without some other form of animal life, even if it were only some insect species.

The trouble had been that other forms of life were taken for granted and their influence on the human mind was too subtle to be consciously understood. The *fact* of other forms of life was a vital element in shaping human orientation toward reality. Without it—

Yesterday John Davenport had finally seen what would result. A grandson of his, Paul Winstead, now in his early fifties, had paid him a social visit. That is, he had always considered such visits to be social visits, but now he wasn't so sure. For a long time now he hadn't felt up to having anyone but a nurse around, but every so often he felt lonesome, and there was always a waiting list of those who wanted to call on him.

He hadn't seen Paul for two years, Paul had said, but the last time he could remember seeing Paul was at least thirty years ago. The boy hadn't changed much. He'd always been respectful. The thing is, he was someone to talk to.

"Yup," John had said, reminiscing, "every kid should have a pet or two. When I was a kid I had a dog. A dog is—well, instead of hands and feet it has four feet, but they're very small. The dog is all covered with hair, and it has a tail. A tail is an extension of the spinal cord."

And John had gone on and on, describing the dog. Paul Winstead had been a good listener, nodding and smiling and seeming to get a mental picture of what a dog was like. But he had to use extra imagination.

Then, in a pause, while John was trying to choose a word that would describe what he wanted to say, Paul Winstead had said, very quietly, "You need have no fear, Grandfather John, we have passed the test."

"Test?" John had said. "What test?"

Paul Winstead had chuckled. "We knew that there must be a hidden lesson in your stories," he had said. "Just as your seeming to forget all the time is a living lesson for us to always be alert and meet life every day with renewed interest and excitement, even though nothing new may happen, so also your stories of impossible forms of life are a great lesson to make

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us see the wonder of our being the only possible life form."

"But that isn't so!" John had said. "Was Paul insane?"

Paul had smiled. "We knew it was the greatest test of all, because you made it so difficult to penetrate it to the Truth. Yet you cunningly wove into your stories the clue to their being a test. All these animals are deformed people."

John shook his head in protest.

"No, no," Paul had said. "Let me finish. Let me show you we have found the whole Truth. We know that you have always existed. The proof of that is that the only way we can come into existence is by being born of parents like us. We in turn become parents of children like us. There is no other way possible. Therefore the First Parent must always have existed from the beginning of time. But when was the beginning of time? There we have penetrated the secret too! Time, the universe itself, began a little over seventy years ago! You, Grandfather John, are the Absolute, the First, and you created the universe for us, your descendants, to live in and to control. The very atoms obey the rules you laid down for them!"

"Just a minute," John had said firmly. "Some day you or your descendants will meet up with other people, and with other forms of life, like dogs, and trees. What then?"

"We have seen the great lesson in that too," Paul had said, his face shining with an inner light of vision. "As your descendants it is our responsibility to keep your Creation pure. Any imperfection that develops must be corrected. The great message you have shown us is that we are not your First Creation. Somewhere your First Creation exists. But it failed to pass the test, and for that reason we came into being. It failed, and is imperfect, with deformed people of the type you have described. Our destiny, when we have grown strong, is to cleanse the universe of all such deformity."

There had been more of that. John had tried to show it wasn't so, but he had realized how hopeles it was. It was impossible for anyone who has not seen other forms of life to imagine them really existing.

And suddenly it had come to John with blinding insight that if it were impossible while he was still alive to influence them, how much more certain the trend would develop when he was gone!

People simply did not believe something outside their experience.

And with that insight had come an insight into the future. When contact was eventually made with the main branch of humanity, or with any form of life, his descendants would consider it their Divine Mission to detroy it. If, meanwhile, they

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had become strong enough, it would mean a devastating holy war with no possible compromise. If contact came within a century or so, it would mean only that his descendants would go down to destruction themselves.

But the basic insight John had gained was that the whole mess could have been easily predicted. It was just one of many similarly predictable things that could happen in space. *Given, an aquarium condition . . .*

So, what should never have happened now had to be destroyed. It had to be, John decided grimly. There were no two ways about it.

But good Lord! Why couldn't mankind have forseen the possibility of this arising? It was inevitable that over the centuries there would be shipwrecks on out of the way worlds under conditions where the survivors would be able to start a colony that would continue after they died. If the danger had been known ahead of time they would have known better than to have children.

His frown was a deviation. Ada Blake was quick to notice it, and to realize that today was to be different. In what way it would be different she didn't know, nor did it matter. To grant Greatgrandpa John's slightest whim or wish was her greatest desire in life.

Aside from the joy it would bring her, it would mean that her name would go down in history.

She was too wise to let on that she had noticed the frown. Though her heart pounded furiously, not a flicker of changed expression showed on her face.

"Um," John said.

"Yes?" Ada said mildly.

"Take this synthetic pablum away and bring me some clothes."

"Yes, Greatgrandpa John," Ada said serenely.

She returned what was left of the breakfast to the cart and pushed it ahead of her out of the room. In the corridor she doubled her pace, arriving at the desk breathless and flushed.

"He wants his clothes!" she gasped. "I think Greatgrandpa John is going out. I could *feel* it. Oh!" She clasped her hands together. "To think it would happen to me!"

"Well, get some clothes for him!" the head nurse said, unable to completely conceal her envy. "Don't keep him waiting! Hurry up!"

Ada was all thumbs and unable to concentrate. It took the combined efforts of the head nurse and two other nurses to get the clothes secured in Ada's hands and steer her in the right direction.

Greatgrandpa John permitted her to dress him. He would rather have dressed himelf, but he knew he would have to conserve every ounce of his strength. It was not going to be easy to destroy them all. But

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there was a way—or there had been a way.

Panic touched his mind. Maybe there was no longer a way. But there had to be a way. There had to. If *that* way was gone, then he would just have to find another.

Ada dressed him, looking on his withered frame with the sense of privilege uppermost in her mind. Greatgrandpa's body, she felt quite convinced, could have remained youthful forever if he had wished it. It's aging was another of his great lessons to his children, just as were his daily rituals which might have been considered senile forgetfulness in anyone else. Greatgrandpa John knew, she was sure, that everything he did would go down in history, and its lessons would be pondered by the best scholars of each generation, forever.

When he was completely dressed she got to her knees and bowed, covering her secret worship by pretended concern over the bow knots of his shoelaces. She was flushed when she stood up, too conscious of her audience of untold future generations, who would watch the tapes of this historic moment. She had not knelt at Greatgrandpa John's feet for effect, but because she worshiped him.

When she straightened, she stopped breathing for a moment in awe. It had been impossible for her to realize how compelling a figure he was. His blue dress uniform concealed the leanness of his body. He stood a foot taller than the tallest of other men, his shoulders were wide, wide. His white hair was covered by the cap, and the visor of the cap concealed his forehead so that only his face, his deeply sunken, fiery eyes, his sharply bridged nose, his square chin and firm mouth, could be seen.

"Well?" he said, his lips quirking in amusement.

She tried to speak, and couldn't. The strength of his spirit was beyond her understanding. She could only sense it and tremble.

"Come with me," he said, going past her to the door. "I may need you to lean on, at times." *And I want you with me at the last,* he thought, *because I am afraid.*

And so, side by side, she in her spotless white nurse's uniform, and he, taller than she by fourteen inches and in his blue uniform of Space Command, they walked the length of the corridor, not deigning to notice the head nurse who huddled fearfully behind her desk, and pushed through the double doors to emerge onto the street.

There, John looked up with silent satisfaction at the flat ceiling of yard square panels of glass set in a steel latticework, fifty feet above, and the dozens of widely distributed large balloons resting against their under surface, ready to be caught up in any draft of escaping air caused by a broken panel and

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seal the opening until repairs could be made.

Outside, just beyond that flat ceiling above, lay the vacuum of space.

A lot had happened, John Davenport reflected grimly, since that day, almost seventy years ago, when the ship he commanded crashed. It was a shame it was going to have to be destroyed — but it should never have been brought into existence.

The worst part of it was that there was no way to let the government back on Earth know. But if there were, he would not have to do what he knew he must.

Beyond the ceiling of glass, some sixty million miles away, floated a brilliant blue-white sun, much smaller than Sol. But which sun, out of all the millions? The hyperdrive relays had jammed and God knows how may parsecs or thousands of parsecs the ship had gone before repairs could be made. Nine men had given their lives, willingly, each stepping into the fatal area surrounding those relays the instant the one before them dropped, until, after ninety minutes, the last one cut the relays and the ship slipped back into space. Ninety minutes at a theoretically infinite velocity. But that had been ninety minutes ship time, and whether the ship had entered space again a hundred or a million or ninety billion parsecs from the Earth, no one knew. The pattern of the stars had had no point of positive identification to the ship's instruments.

Ill luck had been present from the start on that "routine" trip from the Sol System to Polaris, and it had stayed to the end. Attempting a simple landing on this eight hundred mile diameter ball of rock for the purpose of setting up instruments capable of probing farther than the ship's instruments, something had again gone wrong, and the ship had been damaged beyond repair.

Stuck here permanently, unless they were eventually rescued, they had built a standard pressurized colony along the lines first used on Mars, of a heavy glass ceiling whose weight was exactly balanced by the air pressure underneath.

Like the castaways on desert islands of pre space travel literature, they had made the most of the materials at hand. A plentiful supply of oxygen lay in the rocks at their feet, as well as the raw material for an inexhaustible supply of glass and steel.

The starship's lifeboats were excellent craft for seaching nearby space and the entire surface of their desert asteroid, and a rich supply of carbon salts had been located and mined for the raw materials of synthetic foods.

When at last they knew that man could live indefinitely on this ball of stone, they had been

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happy. If not they, then their children, or their children's children, or their descendants in the nth generation would be rescued.

In their naiveté they had been happy. Like the early peoples of Earth they had lived together, man and woman, and begot child, and child had begot child.

More ceiling and more walls and more atmosphere had expanded the living room until now, after seventy years, there were three square miles of surface where man could live normally.

Fools, they had been. Naive fools, to have brought all this into existence. It had to be stopped. It had to be destroyed.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Great-grandpa John," Ada said, misinterpreting the reason for his silent survey of his surroundings.

John Davenport nodded, and for a moment felt a little confused. *Was he right?* He knew he was right. But what if his reasoning was a product—not of logic—but of senility?

The thought disturbed him.

How many were there now? How many would he have to murder?

"What's the population now?" he asked.

"Four hundred and thirty-one," Ada said proudly. "Our birth rate is close to fifty a year and our death rate only three a year, at present."

"Three in the past year?" John Davenport said. "What killed them?"

If only something showed promise of wiping them all out! That would absolve him.

"One was murdered," Ada said grimly. "The second was his murderer, who was hanged. The third one was my grandmother, Shirl."

"Shirl?" John said, pain cramping his heart. "Why wasn't I told?"

Ada looked up at him serenely, not answering. After a moment he turned away. He felt a vague sense of relief, and it came to him why. He would not be murdering Shirl, nor any of the others who had already died. And these others, even though they were his own descendants, were strangers to him.

"Do you want to see the Elders?" Ada asked. They had been just standing there now for almost ten minutes.

"No," John said curtly. "No. I don't want to see anybody just yet. I just want to—" He looked vaguely around, trying to organize his thoughts into a plan. "I just want to walk around. That's it. Kind of look things over."

He began walking slowly. He would have to go slow, not get too tired, sort of feel his way into things, not go too directly to the power plant.

If he played it right, casual like, they would think it just a sentimental whim when he asked

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to be left alone in the reactor control room.

If he played it right. Casual like.

He walked slowly, and paused now and then to pat the heads of children in a secret regretful farewell to them, ignoring the grownups who hovered in the background. And he didn't doubt that if he should fail, a special medal would be run off for the children whose heads he patted to wear all their life to set them off as a class above all those whose heads he had not patted.

Fifty babies in the past year? Let's see, John Davenport mused. There were the four girls, and they had chosen him and Winstead and Blake and White, with the understanding that any of the girls who decided she didn't want the one she chose permanently could pick another of the fifty some odd men. But they stuck, and altogether there had been twenty-three children that lived and grew up, ten of them girls.

That had been the first generation. And Winstead had worked out some system of pairing off the girls with boys so that there would be a minimum of inbreeding in each generation indefinitely, and it had been made into law—not that it would matter much for a couple of generations, but those problems had to be solved and settled by those who knew about such things while they were still alive.

The ten couples of the first generation had begotten—a good word—seventy-two children. An even number of boys and girls, and they had paired off into thirty-six couples. And Ada, the nurse, was one of their offspring, and no doubt plenty of her generation was producing now. Four hundred and thirty-one was about right, with maybe seventy-five couples in the third generation producing about one child a week. That's what Winstead had figured it would be by now.

John Davenport mentally kicked himself for not keeping up on things, forgetting that he kept up on things daily with avid interest—and forgot them as quickly as he listened to them.

He came back to an awareness of his surroundings.

The streets were laid out nicely. Most of the houses were new, and there were a lot more of them than he would have thought.

Although they had individuality and an attempt at architectural originality, they were all basically designed for The Emergency—loss of atmosphere from a major rupture of the dome. Entrances were potential airlocks. A large meteor could crash through the ceiling of the colony and let all the air escape, and probably no one would die except those directly struck by the meteor.

And there had been recent damage from a meteor. Ada tried to distract his attention away from it, but he saw the

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half dozen wrecked houses and the start of reconstruction. Looking overhead, he found the place where the three foot square glass panels glinted with newness and the steel framework was newly painted.

The whole repair job was being expertly handled.

"Was anyone hurt, Ada?" John asked.

"Fortunately, no, Greatgrandpa John," Ada said.

He worried for a moment about whether she was fibbing, then remembered that it didn't matter.

A lump rose in his throat. *What a terrible tyrant the future is!* he thought bitterly. *The future is molded more by what is not, than by what is.*

He walked slowly, frowning at the pavement ahead of him.

Not a blade of grass. Not a flower. Not even a useless weed. Any one of the crew of the *Polaris Explorer*, as a mere whim, could have carried a million years of plant evolution on board in his coat pocket. A half dozen seeds of each of a thousand plant species.

Or even a few weed seeds trapped in the trouser cuff of some member of the crew. Winstead had looked. Even one seed, or one sliver of wood that could come to life and grow.

Or a fly. Or a louse. Or a family of mice hidden in the cargo.

Or even a spider.

No one had had such a whim. Why should anyone have had such a foolish whim?

And because no one did, John Davenport was forced to destroy all these descendants of his.

Suddenly a new thought struck him, with such devasting impact that he stumbled, and Ada had to support him. He moaned audibly, not from any physical pain but from the thought.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Ada asked.

"Of course I'm all right," he said, forcing himself to smile calmly. "It's just that—it occurred to me that perhaps this is the last time I will walk through the colony."

"You plan to leave us soon?" Ada asked sadly.

"Perhaps," John Davenport said. Then he saw in this trend of thought the opportunity he had been searching for. He straightened up and squared his shoulders. "For that reason, I would like to pay a last visit to the power plant."

"As you wish," Ada said. "Do you plan to leave us there, Greatgrandpa John?" she asked humbly.

"Perhaps," John Davenport said.

But now a doubt had settled in his mind. Would what he planned to do be any good even if he succeeded? There would be other ships, to other stars, and inevitably another would crash somewhere, and the survivors build a pressurized colony.

Somewhere, sometime, there

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would be another Greatgrandpa John and he might not think things through. And if he did, there would be another, and another, until somewhere, sometime, a Greatgrandpa John would die without having destroyed the colony of his descendants.

So what was the use?

The future was inevitable. It flowed from the past like an engulfing flood, and if he plugged the hole here, on this speck of dust in the Cosmos, it would only pile up and burst through somewhere else.

But, if he could stop the flood here, at least he could die knowing that *he* had succeeded. . . .

The power plant had not changed one iota. At least, not on the outside. It was exactly the same as when it had first been built, seventy years ago.

There was no need for it to change. The nuclear power plant of the ship had been moved out piecemeal and put together again here. Barring accidents, it could produce almost unlimited power forever, if a crew with the know-how to keep it replenished and functioning properly were trained in each generation. Or it could be transformed into a planet buster by manual manipulation of the automatic controls.

Word had gone ahead of them, but that was to be expected. John Davenport had been aware of the many people that hovered in the background, watching him every step. Probably everyone who could get away from his job was somewhere near, but keeping a respectful distance.

As John approached the power plant entrance four men came out. One of them gave him quite a start, because he looked exactly like Jerry Blake, seventy years ago. For a brief moment, seeing the man there, it seemed to John that time actually had turned back.

Then the illusion was gone. The man who looked like Jerry stepped forward and introduced himself as Mel Davenport, chief engineer.

"Your youngest grandson, sir," Mel Davenport explained.

"How old are you, Mel?" John asked.

"Thirty-five, sir," Mel said. "Would you like to inspect the plant, sir?"

"I think I would, Mel," John said casually.

"We have tried to do everything as you would want us to do it, sir," Mel said as he led the way inside. "For one thing, during the past ten years we've accumulated a stockpile of the alloy blocks and gotten enough of them started on their nuclear cycle to get a duplicate power plant started. We're setting it up a hundred miles from here. In ten years it will have built up to maximum potential and we will be able to build a second colony."

Mel Davenport was talkative, and obviously proud of the accomplishments of the colony. John only half listened as his

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youngest grandson talked on and on about the various projects.

The food factories had been expanded again and again, and standby food factories had been built. Exploration of mineral and salt deposits to a depth of five miles had been completed all over the planet. Chemical stockpiling was a hundred years ahead of population growth already.

Mel was quite anxious to prove to him that when he left them he could rest assured that the colony would expand on schedule without a hitch. In two centuries population and industrial development would reach the stage where starships could be manufactured.

John Davenport listened to this bright picture with grim absentmindedness while he walked here and there, refreshing his memory on the layout of the power plant.

Around him, pressing in on him, was the vibrant aura of living, eternal, atomic power, so simplified in principles that a crew of uneducated savages could be taught to keep it going.

But there were no uneducated savages, these descendants of his. They were highly intelligent men, dedicated to their work, and convinced that the know-how given to them was on the order of divine revelation.

Their respect for him was a respect for Deity, rather than for an ancestor. To themselves they were high priests rather than engineers.

And nothing he could say could change that.

The alternative to his being God was a nightmare of insecurity they could not possibly accept. He had watched it grow, helpless to prevent it. They had built up a framework of rationalization that had a perfect defense against all logical attack.

Being God, he could not grow old and feeble, but he could *choose* to appear to grow old and feeble as a lesson to them to honor their old ones as they loved Him. Being God, he could not forget from one minute to the next, but he could pretend to, as a lesson to them to be eternally alive to the eternal newness of each moment.

Yes, his deification in their philosophy had been inevitable from the start, and he had not bothered to set them straight because in the long run it would be a good thing. It would give them security, dedication to the welfare of the community.

Nor would it ever have become a bad thing—if there had been so much as cockroaches in the store of crackers aboard the *Polaris Explorer*.

But there had been nothing. Winstead had searched. They had all searched. God how they had searched! Just one seed that could sprout, or one insect that could be made to reproduce. Any form of life at all that could be made to survive and be a fellow life form, a companion to man, in this far off place.

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"You've seen it all now, sir."

John Davenport returned to reality with a feeling of alarm. He looked desperately at the control panels.

"Nothing has been changed here?" he asked sharply.

"Of course not, sir!" Mel said, shocked at the thought.

Of course not. John breathed easier. His eyes went to the damper rod control panel. Behind that panel lay the fool proof computer bank, the brains of the power plant. Fool proof —but there was a way to fool it and that way still existed. And it would turn the pile into a five hundred megaton bomb.

"Do you have any wish, sir?" Mel asked.

"Yes," John Davenport said. "I want to be alone for a few moments. Please wait outside. All of you."

They moved toward the exit. John Davenport stood erect, broad shouldered, every inch the Captain, in his blue uniform, in the center of the power plant floor.

At last he was alone.

It would take only a moment to reverse the connections from zero and maximum load.

John Davenport took a step toward the control panel, then hesitated. Was he right? Was the thought that had come to him last night the product of logic—or senility?

He lifted it into consciousness again and examined it dipassionately.

The human mind is utterly incapable of conceiving of anything totally outside its experience. In an environment where there is only one life form—man himself—and no other, man must inevitably become an Absolute to himself, and even the idea of a life form other than his own must become impossible to conceive.

Oh, they had tried to tell their children about trees and flowers and dogs and birds, but it had been obvious the children's conception of other life forms had been much like anyone's conception of hyperspace—an extrapolation from the known, the experienced. How could a generation pass on to succeeding generations something which it could not grasp itself? Even now, to Ada and the others of the third generation, a conception of a dog, or a blade of grass, was impossible. What then of the nth generation, millions or billions strong?

Logic would tell them the human form is an Absolute of nature. By the same token the technology and the knowledge they had inherited would be divine revelation, and he, John Davenport, would be their God.

Confronted with the parent civilization, as they would be eventually, their instinct would be to destroy, in a holy war of extermination. They could never accept and embrace something that was an affront to the basic Absolutes of their philosophy.

A planet such as the Earth

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would be the unimaginable extreme of unclean horror, where the stench of rotting and fermenting vegetation would cause them to faint, and a dog walking down the street would be to them a blasphemy against the purity of the universe itself! And man, living by devouring the dead remains of such abominations, would be more horrible to them than medieval man's conception of the fiends in hell.

That was the realization that had come to him last night, in the quiet of his room.

The nth generation of his descendants would become a destroying behemoth, cleansing the universe in a holy crusade, and totally incapable of compromise. Compromise? It would be easier for a civilized man on Earth to abandon his own Absolutes and wallow in the mire with his hogs and consider them his equal.

Yes, that would happen, unless he, right now, destroyed the potential destroying monster he had let come into existence.

John Davenport took another step toward the control panel. It would be only the work of a moment. He knew exactly what to do. He wouldn't even need any tools. He could lift out the right panel and break the fine wires with his fingers and reconnect them. Then the computer, in seeking for stability of the pile, would have all its directives reversed.

But again he hesitated. He was right. He knew beyond doubt that he was right. But was he? Was it possible he was wrong?

And even if he were right, even if he did this thing, and destroyed his children, what of the next starship that became wrecked on some sterile world too far from home for hope of rescue?

And the next? And the next?

If what he believed must happen would become inevitable *if* he didn't cross those two fine wires under the panel, *was it not just as inevitable if he did?*

Somewhere, sometime... . .

And suddenly he knew he couldn't go through with it.

The same psychological principles that made his logic about what must eventually happen valid made it impossible for him to stop it here and now. He had never killed anything in his life, he could not force himself to kill now. Not, at least, for an abstract idea.

He reached out and touched the panel, but he did not lift it out. Regretfully he let his hand drop away from it.

Turning away from the control panel, he went with faltering, weary step toward the door beyond which his children's children awaited him with an absolute trust such as they could have given only to their God.

Of course he was wrong, he was already beginning to tell himself in the process of rationalization. He was getting senile. Why, he might have done that

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foolish thing! He wasn't to be trusted any more.

He reached out to the door to open it. For a moment he hesitated, and in his mind's eye rose the conviction of certainty. If he opened the door now, it would then be too late, and it would happen and his chance to stop it would be gone forever.

But even if he stopped it here and now, somewhere, sometime, in some other far off place, it would still happen. . . .

Or maybe it wouldn't.

He pushed open the door, and suddenly all of his years settled down over his shoulders.

THE END

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THE MIND MERCHANTS

By O. H. LESLIE

You've seen ads offering books, correspondence courses, and even personal instruction. In the future all that could change. You may see ads reading: "For Sale. My Mind and Everything In It."

NEVA hated bringing home the evening paper. She dreaded the way her husband Cal snatched it eagerly from her hand and shuffled his way to the classified advertisements. She knew what would follow. His hard-breathing examination of the close-printed columns, his snort of disgust, his throwing aside the crumpled sheets at the base of the wheel chair that was his prison.

But tonight was different. He greeted her with a wan smile when she came through the door, his thin, scholarly face reposed. When she put the paper on his lap, he opened it calmly, and even glanced briefly at the headlines before turning to the Employment section.

Encouraged by his attitude, she said:

"Cal, don't look tonight. You know how it upsets you—"

He grinned at her. "It's okay, honey. Tell the truth, I'm feeling pretty good tonight. Won't bother me at all."

"I'm glad." She went to her knees and put her blonde head into his lap. He stroked the long, soft strands. Even in the poor light of dusk, he could see the gray hairs already infiltrating the gold. The sight of them almost restored his bitterness; Neva was only thirty.

Then he was cheerful again. "Okay, beautiful. Let papa read his paper. Who knows? Maybe I'll find the ideal ad. 'Wanted — psycho-semanticist, must be invalid. Good pay, short hours—' "

"Cal . . ."

He rumpled her hair. "Come on, Goddess. Put papa's potatoes on, I'm starving to death."

She got up, kissed him quickly on the mouth, and went humming into the tiny kitchen of their two-room

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Cal was being stripped of a life-time's knowledge. Neva wept.

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flat. Cal Donahue spread the newspapers open and traced his finger down the Help Wanted ads. It didn't take much study to determine how fruitless the search was. His specialty was scholastic, and what was worse, esoteric. His other talents were limited. His physical capabilities were few. Cal slapped the arm of the wheel chair, and fought down the anger and self-disgust that was rising in his chest.

Then he flipped the page over and read the Buyers and Sellers notices. As usual, it was dominated by the Know-How agents and brokers, and individual K-H offerings.

For Sale—*Thorough knowledge of mineralogy by accredited college graduate. Crystallography, geology, mining. Over 12 years experience in field work. Contact Adams K-H Agency, N.Y. 7.*

For sale—*Complete knowledge of French language. School-trained, actual resident in France. Owner must sacrifice. Call OXford 5-9900, after six.*

For Sale—*Stress engineer entering new field wishes to dispose thorough knowledge. Equivalent three years college, four experience. Will pay K-H fee. Contact Harvey K-H Agency, 150 Grand St., Bklyn.*

Cal skipped rapidly down the column, looking for the Wanted to Buy ads. He found what he was looking for: the advertisement which appeared in every edition.

Wanted—*Knowledge in all and varied fields, no limitation. Highest prices paid, all K-H agency and lab fees arranged. Contact Mann K-H Agency, 585 Madison Avenue, New York 17.*

He was still looking at the words when Neva came out of the kitchen, a tidy apron around her slim waist. He smiled at her, and enjoyed the mirrored pleasure in her face.

"Oh, Cal," she said. "You don't know how *good* I feel when you're like this."

"Why shouldn't I feel happy? I got flattered today. Does wonders for the ego."

"Oh?" She tilted her head in a mock gesture of wifely jealousy. "All right, who's the blonde?"

"You're the only blonde in my life. No, as a matter of fact, it was a little bald-headed man, from a place called

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the Mann Agency. One of those mind brokerages."

Her face darkened. Neva didn't like to hear about the K-H agencies; the whole system of buying and selling brainpower unnerved and frightened her. Cal had tried to explain the process once, but she had clapped her hands over her ears and refused to listen. It was unholy, unGodly. Trading knowledge with the same cold disdain you juggled stocks and bonds...

"What did he want? What made him come here?"

"I'll tell you. From what I gathered from my little bald friend, the whole Mann Agency is a house-shop, set up to serve one man. He was pretty cagey about it, but I'm sure that's the story—"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, you understand how these K-H agencies operate. They're just like brokers. People who want to sell their knowledge come to them looking for buyers. Same thing works in reverse. They get a fee, and everybody's happy."

"But they don't—" She swallowed hard. "They don't do the actual—business."

"No, they don't do the transferring. That's up to the buyer and seller; they can go to any authorized K-H Transference Lab they want. But here's what I figure about the Mann Agency; I figure they're owned by Emerson Wheary."

"Who?"

"Wheary. You've heard me talk about him. He's the big money man. Owns the largest string of atom plants in the country. Only now Wheary's tired of collecting dollars. He's buying brainpower."

Neva shivered. She glanced towards the kitchen, listening for the comforting, everyday sound of water boiling in the pot. She didn't like talking about the subject, but Cal's mood was too good to spoil. She said: "But why, Cal? What does he want all that knowledge for?"

"Who can say? Some guys get lots of dough, they want power. Maybe this is the kind of power Wheary wants. He's filled his head with more damned knowledge than anybody in the world. Only he's not satisfied yet."

"But *why?*"

"Beats me. He was a poor slum kid, practically illiterate. Maybe he's getting back at all the smart boys, buying up what they know. But who'd figure he'd want psycho-semantics?"

She was shocked. "Cal!"

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"Don't get so upset," he grinned. "Papa's not selling. My little specialty doesn't put food on the table, but it's all I got."

"That's terrible! Asking you a thing like that!"

"Why not? It's business, Neva. I've got something Wheary wants, he offers money. Nothing to get upset about."

She trembled with loathing. "Ugh! It makes me sick. Robbing people's minds—yanking out their knowledge like—like a tooth! I couldn't *stand* them doing that to you, Cal."

"Not even for five thousand bucks?"

"Not for anything!"

He reached out and encompassed her waist with his big hands. She went to her knees to embrace him. They clung together like children, and then kissed like man and wife. After a while, Cal whispered:

"Sometimes I think I'm crazy. Maybe the bald guy was right. Five thousand bucks would help us, honey. It wouldn't go far, but it would help. Maybe I'd be better off having this psychosemantics stuff erased from my mind . . ."

"Don't talk like that!"

"It's true, isn't it? I'm not much good to us, am I, Neva? I'm just a thing in a wheel chair . . ."

The depression was coming on him again, and she held him tighter, tighter, trying to ward it off.

"You're a genius," she said fervently. "Don't ever forget that, Cal. Those people at the university, they said so."

"Geniuses eat, too, honey. Their wives have to eat. Don't forget that book, Neva, that lousy masterpiece of mine. Five hundred and seventeen copies . . ."

"It was a fine book! The *Science Review*—

He laughed bitterly.

"Cal!" the girl cried, and the tension of the evening snapped within her, snapped like a taut thread. Tears fell, and in the kitchen, the water boiled over the rim of the pot.

In the morning, Neva woke late from a troubled sleep and had to rush Cal's breakfast. She was a Triple-A rated stenographer in the municipal service, but her high standing didn't excuse lateness. She kissed him hurriedly, and left.

Cal wheeled himself around the apartment when she was gone, trying to work up an incentive to return to the old battered typewriter that

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squatted on the dining table. He was half-through an article concerning his specialty, a labor of infinite pains that would appear in a low-circulation scientific journal that paid its authors only in prestige. *Prestige and potatoes,* Cal thought wryly, *prestige fried, prestige baked, prestige sauteed.* It was going to be a bad day.

By eleven o'clock, he had pecked out eight lines of the article, and was grateful for the interruption of the doorbell.

The man who was waiting on the sill lifted his hat, and his dome glistened in the hallway light.

"You again?" Cal said. "I told you yesterday, Mr.—"

"Beech," the man said pleasantly, walking in and removing his velvet-collar overcoat. He handled the shiny-leather brief case under his arm with loving tenderness. "Yesterday was yesterday," he smiled. "I had an opportunity to talk to my client, and I'm prepared to make another offer."

"You're wasting your time, Mr. Beech."

"How do you know? I haven't said anything yet." He sat down and unlatched the thick metal locks on his brief case. "Now, simply because Mr. Wheary admires your intelligence, he's being very generous. Frankly, we think he's overstepped himself—"

"Look, fella, it's not a matter of price. I don't like this K-H business, and I don't want any part of it."

"Sure of that?"

Cal hesitated. "All right. Let's hear the figure. Then scram."

"Fifteen thousand," Beech said. Briskly, he took a bulky fountain pen from his pocket and unscrewed the cap. "Now the first place you sign is—"

"Hold it! I'm not signing anything."

"You probably didn't hear me. I said *fifteen thousand.*"

"I heard you, all right. But even if you said *fifty* thousand, I'm not signing my brains away."

The bald-headed man stared at Cal with the same stunned but tolerant look a bishop would give a blasphemer.

"Ah," he said finally. "I know what's troubling you. You're a little afraid of the K-H process. I don't suppose I can blame you; lots of people have the wrong idea about knowledge transference. But let me assure you, it's as safe as—no, safer than a tonsillec-

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tomy. The K-H machine makes a careful record of your brain patterns, and removes *only* those patterns concerning the area of knowledge to be tapped. You simply no longer have the knowledge; your buyer does. But otherwise, you're perfectly the same. So let's be reasonable, Mr. Donahue. The sooner we make the laboratory appointment—"

Cal fixed his eyes on Mr. Beech's bald head as if measuring the broad skull for a splitaxe. Then he growled something, wheeled to the door, and threw it open.

"Out," he said.

"But Mr. Donahue—"

"Out! Tell Mr. Wheary to rob somebody else's brain."

The bald man gathered his paraphernalia hastily and went to the door.

"All right, Mr. Donahue. Don't get frisky with me; I'm a business man. I'll report your reluctance to Mr. Wheary, but I really must know *what* price is—"

"No price!" Cal shouted. "Now get out of here!"

He slammed the door so violently behind Mr. Beech, that a framed photograph fell from its place on the faded wallpaper. He went to it and picked it up. The glass had shattered, and the radiating lines almost obliterated the portrait of Neva and himself, taken on their wedding day. He had stood very straight and tall.

It took Cal almost two weeks to finish the article. When he was done, he squared the sheets on the dining table, and slipped them into a brown envelope. When it was addressed, he turned to Neva, who was sewing by the window, and said:

"Mail this for me tomorrow, will you?"

"Sure, Cal." Her brow furrowed as she looked at him. "Is something bothering you? You've been so quiet tonight."

"Busy. Getting my little masterpiece finished. Gotta hurry up and get it printed, so we can sautee the prestige."

"What's that?"

"Never mind." He wheeled over to the bureau and dropped the envelope on top. Then he picked up the mail that had arrived from the Mann K-H Agency that afternoon. He grimaced, and tossed it back, but not before Neva caught the look on his face.

"What is it, Cal? Who's the letter from?"

"Same bunch. Seems Mr. Wheary hasn't given up yet.

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Last offer is thirty-five thousand. I've got a feeling it won't stop there. We could probably get a million bucks out of that screwball, if we held out long enough."

She slammed the fabric into her lap. "Don't talk that way. I couldn't stand you doing a thing like that. Even for *ten* million dollars."

"Don't worry, honey. It's the only thing I've got left in the world. No," he added quickly, "I don't mean that," and Neva smiled at him mistily and hurried to his side.

Some minutes later, the doorbell broke their embrace.

"Mrs. Donahue?" the man said. "I'm Emerson Wheary."

Her hand flew to her throat.

Wheary was a big man. His bulk overpowered the doorway. There was a hundred pounds too much on him, but expert tailoring had it neatly confined. His small features were embedded into his face, and his eyes were half-closed by the overhang of his heavy brows. He moved gracefully into the apartment. He wasn't smoking, but there was an aroma of costly panatellas following him into the room.

He took his hat off politely and said: "Sorry to pay this unexpected visit. Hope you'll give me a few minutes."

Cal wheeled to face him. "What do you want, Mr. Wheary?"

"You're Calvin Donahue?"

"That's right."

"May I sit down?"

"Yes," Neva said, flustered. She was trying not to show her awe of the man; she knew how Cal felt.

His bulk made the chair invisible. "I'm not here to waste your time, Mr. Donahue. But in talking to Mr. Beech today—"

"Look," Cal said tightly. "Your hatchet man's getting to be a real pest, Mr. Wheary. I'd appreciate it if you'd call him off. I'm not selling anything in my head, understand. That's what I told him today."

"So I heard. That's why I'm calling tonight."

"Offer me a million bucks," Cal said. "I told my wife you would. Offer me a million."

"If that's your final price—"

Neva gasped, and even Cal was shaken by the promptness of his reply. Then the man in the wheel chair recovered his poise.

"Refused," he said. "Not for sale. Good-bye, Mr. Wheary."

"Wait a moment. I had a

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different kind of payment in mind when I came here."

"What's that?"

Wheary smiled. He reached into a breast pocket and produced a slim cigar. He held it towards Cal, and said: "Would you smoke this for me? I'm not permitted them myself, but I enjoy the aroma."

"No, thanks."

The big man sighed, and put the cigar back. Then he folded his hands in his lap and said: "My price concerns something more precious than money, Mr. Donahue. To put it bluntly, the ability to walk."

Neva stood up. There was no reason for it; she had nowhere to go. She sat down again quickly, flushing deeply.

Cal was just staring.

"I know that sounds unusual," Wheary said. "But it's exactly what I have to offer. After your first refusal, I took the liberty of investigating your medical record, Mr. Donahue. It was very interesting. As you might have heard, I have a rather thorough grasp of several medical sciences—"

"Bought and paid for," Cal said.

"Bought and paid for, exactly. But they helped me understand your problem. An unfortunate accident, damage to the lower motor neuron. You have my sympathy."

"So what?" Neva said, her voice shrill. "Say what you have to say!"

Wheary smiled at her. "There is a man," he said.

"So?"

"There is a man named Wickright, a rather famous doctor. You have your specialty, Mr. Donahue, Wickright has his. On occasion, he's performed a delicate and difficult operation on cases of your nature. It has always been successful."

Neva's intake of breath was loud in the quiet room.

"Go on," Cal said.

"I spoke to Dr. Wickright today. He's no longer a young man, and he rarely makes use of his surgical talents. His fees are high, too; ten thousand dollars seems to be the average."

"I don't believe it," Cal snapped. "I never heard of this man."

"And I," Wheary smiled, "never heard of psycho-semantics until this year. But now that I've heard about it, Mr. Donahue, I'm determined to own the knowledge. Do I make myself plain?"

Neva went to Cal's side. "No. Make it plainer, Mr.

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Wheary. If Cal gives you his knowledge, will you guarantee that he can walk again?"

"I am almost certain. If you have doubts about my story, I suggest you call on Dr. Wickright himself. But you needn't plead charity, Mrs. Donahue; it's been tried. Wickright has an admirable attitude. If he acceded to every charity request he received—" He spread his hands.

"All right," Cal said. "If that's all you came to say, Mr. Wheary, we're through talking."

"Are you interested at all?"

Neva opened her mouth, but her husband stopped her words. "Not at all," he said. "Good-bye, Mr. Wheary."

The big man stood up.

"At least think it over," he said. "I know how trying this must be for you, Mr. Donahue. An active man like yourself, chained to that rolling prison. You could probably get a fine teaching job if you had your health. And, of course, your poor wife—"

"Get out!" Cal shouted.

Their visitor rose, bowed, and left.

Late on Friday evening, four days after Emerson Wheary's offer, Cal Donahue woke from a wheel chair doze and glanced in sudden alarm at the face of the kitchen clock.

It was eight-thirty.

He stared at it without comprehension for a moment, and looked towards the dark patch of sky framed in the window. The stars winked back.

"Neva!" he said aloud.

There was no answer. He became frightened, and wheeled about the small apartment like a frantic, caged animal. He didn't think of turning on the lights for five minutes. When he did, he looked around the apartment, and listened to the quiet pulse of the empty rooms.

He went to the telephone and began to dial her office number. Then he remembered that the municipal agency which employed his wife closed their switchboard at six. He hung up and went to the door, listening for sounds behind it. She had never been this late before; if something had happened to her, Cal's life was over.

Then, at nine, he heard her familiar footstep on the stairs.

"Oh, Cal," she said as she entered, "I'm terribly sorry.

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I—I had some shopping to do downtown. I thought I could manage to get home before seven-thirty, but the large crowds—"

"What did you buy?"

"What?" She ran her hand through her hair. He knew the gesture.

"You're not telling the truth, Neva. You didn't go shopping. Where were you?"

"I *was* shopping." She slipped off her coat and went into the kitchen. "I'll get your dinner in a minute—"

"Neva—"

"Please, Cal. You must be starved."

"I'm not hungry. I just want the truth." She was making too much noise with the pots and pans. He hit the wheel savagely and followed her. "What is it, Neva? What were you doing out so late? Was it—" He swallowed hard. "Was it a man?"

She turned so rapidly that her hip struck the handle of a pot and it clattered to the linoleum. She dropped to his side and buried her head in his chest.

"No! No!" Her voice was tear-edged and muffled. "I can't let you think that, Cal! I can't let you!"

"Then what was it?"

She looked up. "Money, Cal. I made some money tonight. Maybe not enough, but if we can talk to this man and see—"

"Money? What are you talking about?"

"Seventy-five hundred dollars. It's—it's one of the best prices they ever paid. The man at the agency told me so. It was a really good opportunity, Cal, I had to take it—"

"Talk sense!"

"*The K-H!*" she screamed.

"What?"

"I went to the K-H agency on Tuesday. The one on Fortieth Street. They didn't give me much hope at first, but then I got a call this morning. I wanted ten thousand, but they couldn't find me a buyer—"

"A buyer for what?" he grasped her shoulders in his big hands and shook her. "A buyer for what?"

"My stenographic knowledge. I sold it!"

He released her, and his eyes swam dizzily.

"Cal, you have to understand." She began to cry, but he offered no comfort. "I know how you feel about this thing, but sometimes it's necessary. It didn't hurt at all, really it didn't! I just—can't do the work any more. That's all there is to it. I'll have to

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get some other kind of job—"

"Neva . . ." His face was tortured.

"*This* was more important, Cal. Don't you see that? Now we don't have to do business with Wheary. Now we can go to that doctor. We can pay him ourselves."

He reached out and pulled her to him.

Cal hadn't shed a tear since the accident that crippled him. But he cried now.

The taxi-driver was helpful. He came out of the car and went to the back, and put his strong hands beneath the wheel chair. Neva tried to help him, but he grinned and told her to step aside. With Cal's assistance, he managed to get the wheel chair on the sidewalk, in front of the Fifth Avenue apartment building.

When he drove off, Cal and Neva looked at the impressive façade of the house. It promised interior magnificence.

"Well?" Neva said. "Ready to beard the lion?"

"Ready."

She pushed him to the entrance. They went down a long plush carpet to the elevators, and once inside, pressed the button marked "eighteen."

An elderly woman answered the door chime. She was dressed in black, with a high-neck collar. She was stern and dignified, but the redness around her eyes indicated recent tears.

She ushered them into the apartment. The façade downstairs hadn't lied; it was magnificent.

"Dr. Wickright will be with you soon," she said, and drifted off.

When the man they had come to see entered the room, they were startled at the realization of his age. The doctor walked with the support of a single crutch. His hair was patchy and white, the lines of his face deeply engraved.

"I wish," he said, "that you hadn't come."

Neva stared at him. "I don't understand. When I spoke to you last week—"

"I said I would talk," Dr. Wickright answered, in a querulous, old man's voice. "That's all I said I would do. I didn't mean for you to bring your husband."

"But I thought you should see him. Examine him."

"I know all about the case. Mr. Wheary wanted my professional opinion. I've seen the X-rays, and all the data."

"Now, look," Cal said, "I

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know we haven't got enough to meet your price—"

"Price? Did I mention price?"

"Please, don't misunderstand," Neva said hastily. "We know it's not the money that's important. It's just that we want you to know this isn't a charity case—"

The old man's head was bobbing. He sat down with a groan.

"I'm not well," he said. "Doctors get sick, too—"

"Then you *can't* help us?" Neva cried. "Is that what you're trying to say? You can't because you're ill?"

"Ill? It's not as simple as that. Look at me! I'm not just ill. I'm old! I'm almost seventy! Isn't that reason enough?"

"Let's go," Cal said.

"No!" Neva said. "Dr. Wickright, please tell us the truth. Can you perform this operation, or can't you?"

"I could once," the old man said. "I performed it successfully only five months ago. But that was my last."

"Five months ago? Then you *can* do it! Just once more. You must!"

"I can't!" He went shakily to his feet. "I can't! Never again! All that's over with now—"

In the doorway of the adjoining room, the elderly woman in black appeared.

"Manford," she said very quietly.

"Eh?"

"Manford," she said, looking piteously at Neva and Cal, "tell them the truth."

Neva turned to her. "What truth? What do you mean?"

"He can't perform the operation," she said coldly. "He no longer knows how."

"No longer *knows?*"

"Tell them, Manford," the woman said bitterly. "Tell them what you did for your thirty pieces of silver."

"I had the right!" the old man shrieked. "I had the right! I'm old now. I'm entitled to some peace—"

"You sold it," Cal accused. "Isn't that what you're saying, Doctor?"

"Yes! I'm not ashamed of it. I sold the knowledge."

"Who was the buyer?"

"His name is Wheary," the woman said.

When the thing was finally settled, there was relief in the Donahue household. It was as if there had been a period of raging, infectious illness in their home, and now the fever was broken. They spoke calmly of the forthcoming day, only hoping it would arrive swiftly and be

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done with. Cal worked meticulously and with dedicated speed on the final draft of his last article on psycho-semantics, and Neva buried herself in the elementary chapters of a treatise on stenography.

Then, on a Thursday morning, two weeks after their visit to Dr. Wickright, a low-slung black limousine purred into the parking space before their apartment building. A uniformed chauffeur, militarily brisk and commanding, rang their doorbell, and aided the woman in escorting her invalid husband to the waiting automobile.

They arrived at the Thiel-Scherman K-H Laboratories on upper Park Avenue half an hour later. Emerson Wheary was already on the scene, chatting amiably with the technicians who would perform the transference from mind to mind. He seemed at home here; he was relaxed. But the gray-haired, sober-faced man who accompanied him was tense and watchful.

"This is Dr. Moses," Wheary said, waving a plump hand towards his companion. "My personal physician. He's more like a bodyguard, won't let me do anything by myself." He smiled at Cal and Neva in turn.

Cal said: "Is it all right if my wife stays?"

"Perfectly," Wheary told him. "Now if we can get started—"

"Just a minute." Cal's voice was uneven. "I want to get our terms of agreement straight, Mr. Wheary. I don't want to see a dime of your cash, understand? I just want your assurance that you'll retransfer the knowledge you bought from Dr. Wickright. Then I expect you to complete the rest of the deal."

"Don't worry, Wickright will cooperate. That's my price for restoring his K-H. But you can't expect me to guarantee the success of the operation."

Neva started, and Wheary looked at her paternally.

"Don't be concerned, my dear. It has never failed yet. You'll be walking with your husband in a few months. Now, gentlemen—"

"One moment."

It was the sober-faced Dr. Moses, rising from his chair. "Before you seal this bargain of yours, I want to say something."

"Now, Laurence—"

"Don't try and stop me, Emerson. I've given up appealing to you on this subject.

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Now I'm going to address my appeal to Mr. Donahue."

Cal looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this. As Mr. Wheary's physician, I forbade him this K-H transference. I want you to know that. More important, I'm going to ask you to refuse the transference yourself."

"What?"

"I want you to say no. I want you and your wife to turn around and go home. I realize how important this is to you. But there's something equally important involved. A man's sanity."

"I don't understand."

"Laurence is a worrier," Wheary grinned. "He doesn't know the capacity of the human mind—"

"I know *your* mind," Moses snapped. "I know you've overstepped the border of safety, Emerson. "You've poured in more K-H energy than your mind can tolerate. The danger point is passed. One more transference—"

"It's *my* mind!" Wheary said sharply. "I know it better than all your charts and graphs!"

Cal's knuckles whitened on the wheel chair's arms. "Listen, if there's any danger involved—"

"Only to Mr. Wheary," Moses said. "I believe this transference will tip the scale—"

"Through, Laurence?" A thin smile appeared on Wheary's face. "Then I suggest we don't waste any more time. I have important business this evening. And I'm sure the Donahues wish to get this over with, too."

He waved three fingers at the technicians.

"We're ready," he said.

The chairs were of soft leather, and placed back to back. One of them was removed, and Cal's wheel chair substituted. They sat like human bookends between a labyrinth of electronic equipment. Behind them, a bank of computing machines blinked and chattered, ready to record the wave patterns that emanated from the old and the young brain. When the electrodes were clamped to the temples of the two men, the old one smiled confidently, the young one grimaced and grew taut in the chair. A sedative was swirled into two glasses of water, and they drank them down. A switch was thrown, and the computing machines hummed busily. A technician surveyed the spinning dials calmly, checking the readings against the

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clipboard in his hand. More lights glowed, and a pen scratched on graph paper. A mechanism whined somewhere between the chairs. Still another switch was thrown. The whine increased to a sudden shrill scream, yet over the cacophony came the clear sound of Neva Donahue's sudden sob. Emerson Wheary, drowsy in his chair, muttered something and laughed.

The technicians began to move swiftly, without hurry. On the computing board, a row of red lights winked up and down and then flashed brightly and died. Wheary laughed again and said something, loudly but yet inaudibly. Neva put her hand on Dr. Moses' arm, and he let it remain there.

A moment of eternity lumbered by in the antiseptic room, and then there was silence.

Almost silence.

Wheary was still laughing.

It was a dry chuckle, a pleased chuckle.

Even when they unstrapped the buyer and the seller, his laughter continued.

"Emerson," Dr. Moses whispered.

"Dear God, please," Neva said.

Wheary laughed, and Cal Donahue held his throbbing head between his hands.

"Emerson," the doctor said. "Are you all right?"

"Wise guy little rat," Wheary chortled. "Think you're so damn smart. Stick your nose in a fat book, see what it gets you. Twenty bucks a week, lousy soda jerk, see what it gets you, Richie—"

"What is it?" Neva said.

"He's talking about his brother . . ."

"Sit on your behind all night, talk about Picasso, grow a beard, live on peanut butter sandwiches, you jerk. Not me, Richie, boy, not me—"

"It's the sedative," Neva said. "It must be that—"

"No." Moses shook his head.

"You make me sick, you slob!" Wheary's voice was rising, his eyes focussing on nothing. "You useless egghead! What'll it get you? A kick in the teeth! Twenty bucks a week! Get wise, Richie boy, get wise!" He laughed loudly.

Cal said: "What's wrong with him? What's he saying?"

"I warned him," the doctor said. "I told him he'd gone too far—"

"Dog eat dog!" Wheary

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screamed. "This lousy world! What'll it get you, Richie? Hey, Ma, Richie's got his nose in a book! What'd I tell you, wise guy? Who's smart now? Twenty thousand bucks in a month, that's what I call smart. Biggest damn factory in town, no damn college boys on *my* payroll. Hey, Richie, want to sweep floors?"

"Stop him!" Neva cried, covering her face.

"It's too late," Moses said. "Unless—"

"Phi Beta *Crap!*" Wheary laughed. "That's what *I* say. Never read a book in my life, P & L statements, that's my reading. Look at you and look at me. Who's smart now? *Who's smart now?*"

"Unless what?" Cal said. "What can we do?"

"Reverse the process," Moses answered. "Take back your knowledge, Donahue. It's the only possible way. His mind doesn't have the energy; it needs relief."

Neva said: "Wickright. The operation—"

"I'll take care of that. I promise you. I'll see that he restores Dr. Wickright's K-H. just as he said. But unless we work quickly—"

"All right," Cal said. "Quickly, then.

Dr. Moses signalled to the technicians. As they replaced the electrodes, he went to his patient and put his hand on his shoulder. He looked hard into Wheary's blank eyes and said:

"We're doing it again, Emerson. Do you understand me? It didn't take the first time, so we're doing it again."

"Smart guy," Wheary muttered, but submitted.

Half an hour later, it was done.

It was dark by the time the limousine brought them home. Neva stopped at the corner and bought the evening paper. She offered it to Cal when they were in the apartment, but he smiled and said no. Instead, he turned to the typewriter, rolled in a sheet of paper, and wrote:

"Psycho-Semantics and Society"
Chapter One

THE END

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